Evaluation of the Practice Guide for Intervention (PGI): Staff perceptions of Quality Assurance processes

Chee Seng Chong, Sarah Cassidy, Sasha Nahleen, Ofir Thaler & Mark Howard

Aims

This study examined current staff perceptions and experiences relating to Quality Assurance (QA) processes implemented to support the Practice Guide for Intervention (PGI).

Methods

The data examined in this report was collected as part of a larger study aimed at understanding Community Corrections staff perspectives about their ongoing use of the PGI five years after implementation. Staff were sampled through an online survey sent out to all Corrective Services NSW Community Corrections Officers (CCOs) and through semi-structured online interviews with 14 Unit Leaders.

Results

Survey responses indicated that supervising officers tended to hold positive views of current QA processes, which were more pronounced for Trainee CCOs compared to CCOs and Senior CCOs. On average the QA processes were endorsed as improving officers' interviewing skills and the quality of their written case notes. QA feedback was also viewed as strengths-based and constructive, although there were indications that such processes may be enhanced by additional support structures and resources for post-feedback professional development.

Interviews with Unit Leaders indicated more consistently positive perspectives of the QA processes, including by giving deeper insights into how their officers work and facilitating coordination of skills development activities. Identified key facilitators of the QA processes included ongoing collaboration with and support from Practice Managers, as well as administrative tools such as the Practice Review database. Barriers included some experiences of resistance among supervising officers to QA processes and associated views of these processes as part of professional development, and Unit Leaders identified avenues for continuous improvement relating to advanced skills training for both themselves and supervising officers.

Conclusion

This study indicates that Community Corrections staff are receptive of the QA processes and generally held positive perspectives of their utility. Given the recognised importance of quality of service delivery, this study gives promising indications for the ongoing utilisation of QA processes as part of the PGI operational model, with potential lead-on effects for supervision outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

The Practice Guide for Intervention (PGI) was first introduced in 2016 as part of the Enhanced Offender Supervision workstream of the Department of Justice (now Department of Communities and Justice or DCJ) Strategies to Reduce Reoffending. The PGI is a structured framework of manualised exercises that Community Corrections Officers (CCOs) selectively work through with people under their supervision to help address a range of criminogenic and responsivity factors. The initial iteration of the PGI was rolled out across Corrective Services NSW Community Corrections offices from June 2016 using a phased approach. This approach provided CCOs with opportunities to develop familiarity and competencies with the PGI before its delivery was made mandatory (see Thaler et al., 2019 for more detailed information about the PGI and how it was implemented).

Since its implementation, several PGI evaluation studies focusing on the initial stages of rollout and early outcomes have been conducted (see Howard et al., 2019 for a summary of these studies). In an early impact evaluation study, Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) compared reoffending rates of those who were released on supervised parole condition against those who were released unconditionally before and after the implementation of PGI (Ooi, 2020). They found that after the implementation of the PGI, those who were supervised had a slightly lower rate of reoffending within 12 months of release from prison compared to those who were unsupervised; this reduction, however, was not statistically significant. The study concluded there was no evidence that the PGI had any impact on recidivism beyond what was already being achieved by Corrective Services NSW Community Corrections before the introduction of the PGI.

One caveat of that study is that it is unclear whether the outcomes observed were impacted by factors associated with the quality of service delivery during the early stages of PGI implementation. For example, an early process evaluation study by Corrections Research, Evaluation and Statistics (CRES) found that although the PGI was frequently delivered in sessions, officers often chose to deliver generalist and process-oriented exercises that were often unrelated to their supervisees' case plans (Chong et al., 2020). While the PGI was designed to be flexible such that officers may select an unplanned exercise if it better suits their supervisees' presenting responsivity needs (e.g., an acute crisis situation due to sudden homelessness), the result of this study raises questions about the fidelity of delivery to the program's design and the extent to which PGI activities and overall dosage were adequate in addressing criminogenic needs.

Perhaps also explaining variations in PGI delivery, the differences in philosophies and orientations that officers hold towards their roles can influence how they interact with and apply behaviour change techniques in supervision sessions with their supervisees (Ricks & Louden, 2014). Another process evaluation study by CRES found that during the early implementation phase, a large proportion of supervising officers identified more with traditional program brokerage roles over their putative roles as agents of behaviour change under the new PGI model of supervision (Tran et al., 2019).

It is well established that behaviour change interventions are most effective when the officers delivering the service are well-trained and implement the intervention as intended (Bonta et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012; Robinson et al., 2011). As such, over recent years the PGI model has undergone further development that included the implementation of quality assurance procedures to provide officers with opportunities for continuous professional development.

Quality Assurance in Corrective Services NSW Community Corrections

Within the context of Corrective Services NSW Community Corrections, one facet of quality service delivery is reflected by the ability of officers to apply the principles of effective intervention through the appropriate use of PGI and other interviewing skills. To encourage the development of these competencies, two Quality Assurance (QA) processes, Interview Observations (IO) and Practice Reviews were introduced in 2018.

Interview Observations are an opportunity for officers to receive constructive feedback on their interviewing skills. During an Interview Observation, a Unit Leader[1] observes and rates how well CCOs applied four main skills in supervision sessions against a checklist (IO Checklist). These skills are rapport building (e.g., use of affirmations), intervention focuses (e.g., identifying the aim of the PGI exercise used), cognitive techniques (e.g., helping the offender develop alternative thoughts or behaviours) and pro-social modelling (e.g., reinforcing prosocial behaviour and attitudes). At the end of the observation sessions, the Unit Leader uses the IO Checklist to guide feedback and discussion with the officer. The feedback is intended to be strengths-based and allow the officer to identify ways to improve their practice. Although IOs are generally completed by Unit Leaders, they can also be completed by other peers such as Senior CCOs.

While Interview Observations focusses on officers' interviewing and other soft skills, Practice Reviews involve a detailed desktop review of officers' written case work through four stages: Review, Identify, Discuss, and Action. At the Review stage, Unit Leaders conduct a desktop review of officers' written case notes and case plans on OIMS against a list of

criteria specified on the Practice Review Tool and check against any available ratings on the officers' IO Checklists. Upon completing the review, Unit Leaders then 'Identify' the officer's strengths and areas to develop and proceeds to 'Discuss' the outcomes of the review with them, before putting an 'Action' plan to support staff in developing their skills.

From January 2020, it was mandatory for all officers to complete one Interview Observation every six months. These requirements were made more stringent as of January 2022 and all officers are currently required to complete two to four Interview Observations every six months. The use of Practice Reviews was made mandatory from January 2021 and all officers with a supervision caseload are required to complete at least two Practice Reviews a year.

Aims

Following updates to the PGI, and in line with the DCJ Strategy to Increase the Effectiveness of the PGI, CRES has been asked to undertake a second phase of evaluations of the PGI as it pertains to current Community Corrections operations. This study aims to understand current staff perceptions of the utility and efficacy of the ongoing QA processes and was conducted as part of a broader evaluation of overall staff perceptions about the ongoing use of the PGI (see Cassidy et al., 2023). The findings of this study are intended to inform strategic decisions on the continued best practice delivery of the QA procedures and how staff may be further supported to enhance the delivery of the PGI. To achieve these aims, staff perceptions were sampled through a state-wide online survey administered to CCOs and semi-structured interviews conducted with Community Corrections Unit Leaders.

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[1] Since the time of study, the role title of Unit Leader had changed to Team Leader. The term Unit Leader is retained in this report to reflect the operational context and methods as they applied to the current study.

METHODS

The data examined in this report was collected as part of a larger study (see Cassidy et al., 2023 for a detailed description of the study methodology). In brief, staff perceptions were sampled between November and December 2021 through an online survey sent out to all CCOs across NSW and through semi-structured interviews with several selected Unit Leaders.

The online survey for CCOs was hosted on Alchemer and comprised of 32 open and close-ended questions (not including demographic questions) intended to generate insights into the current fidelity of PGI and QA delivery. The semi-structured interviews with Unit Leaders explored themes similar to those in the online survey but were asked from a higher level supervisory perspective. As the survey and interviews sampled staff perceptions across a range of topics, only responses relevant to the current report's research aims were analysed in this report.

Community Corrections Officers online survey

A total of 384 eligible[2] officers responded to the survey, of which 332 (86%) responded to every question. All partially completed surveys were retained for analysis. As the analysis conducted in this study was segregated by officer role, Table 1 shows the number of eligible respondents by role (see Cassidy et al., 2023 for more details about the characteristics of the sample).

Table 1. Number of eligible responses received by officer role

Role	Number of respondents
First Year Community Corrections Officer (Trainee)	91
Community Corrections Officer (CCO)	167
Senior Community Corrections Officers (SCCO)	126
TOTAL	384

Unit Leader interviews

A total of 14 Community Corrections Unit Leaders from different regions of NSW participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and were video recorded with the consent of the interviewees. Seven of these Unit Leaders identified as female and each region was represented by two Unit Leaders who were recruited from different offices.

Analytical plan

The Unit Leader interviews were transcribed into text and analysed in QSR NVivo 12 using a simplified content analysis approach. With the help of a detailed coding framework, the interviews were coded systematically by reading through each transcript and ascribing a code or label to different segments of data depending on the theme or meaning conveyed. The development of the coding framework was initially informed by the research questions of interest, and then further refined to include emergent themes identified through multiple sessions of internal discussion and inter-coder

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[2] Only responses from CCOs, First Year Community Corrections Officers (Trainees), or Senior Community Corrections Officers (SCCOs) who consented to the use of their data for evaluation purposes and provided responses beyond the demographic questions were examined in this paper.

reliability testing between the authors. Inter-coder reliability was conducted by two of the authors who coded approximately 20% of the total interviews separately and then compared the outcomes of the coding to determine the level of agreement in the codes. The team reached a final agreement level of .40, which is benchmarked as 'Fair/Moderate' agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Responses to the close-ended online survey questions were aggregated and reported as descriptive statistics while the qualitative data from CCOs and Unit Leaders were used to provide narrative context.

RESULTS

How do staff perceive the ongoing use of QA processes?

Supervising officers

Given that perceptions of the QA processes are likely to vary as a function of supervising officers' roles and experience, the following analyses were segregated by role of respondents including CCOs, Trainees and SCCOs.

Skills improvement

Figure 1 shows a summary of officers' responses to the statement that Interview Observations helped improve their interviewing skills. Across all officers, responses to this statement were mixed, with about half (53.7%) indicating agreement or strong agreement. When split by officer role, Trainees were more positive about the statement with the majority (85.7%) of them indicating agreement or strong agreement when compared with CCOs (47.2%) and SCCOs (41.8%).

When asked about the utility of Practice Reviews, officers reported mixed perceptions with 61.9% of them showing agreement or strong agreement with the statement that Practice Reviews were beneficial to their skills development (see Figure 2). Trainees
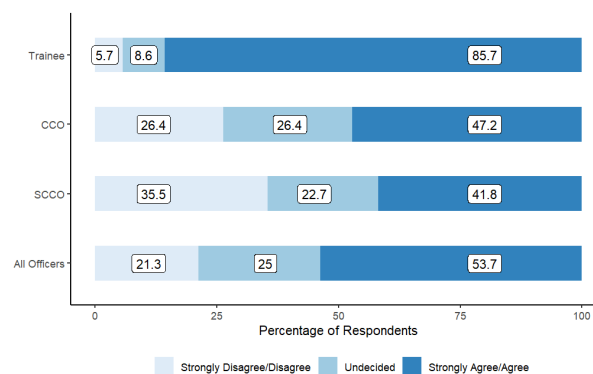

Figure 1. Officers' agreement with the statement that Interview Observations helped improve their Interviewing skills (n=324)
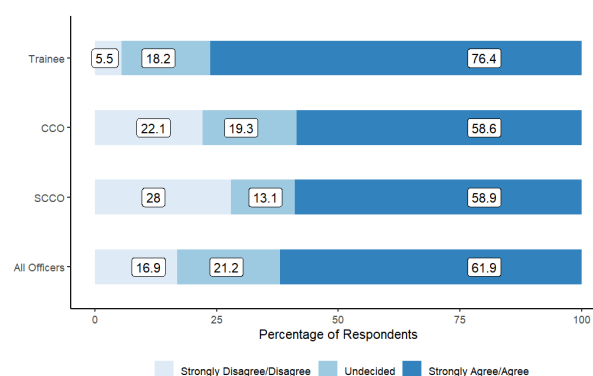

Figure 2. Officers' agreement with the statement that Practice Reviews were beneficial to their skills development (n = 307)
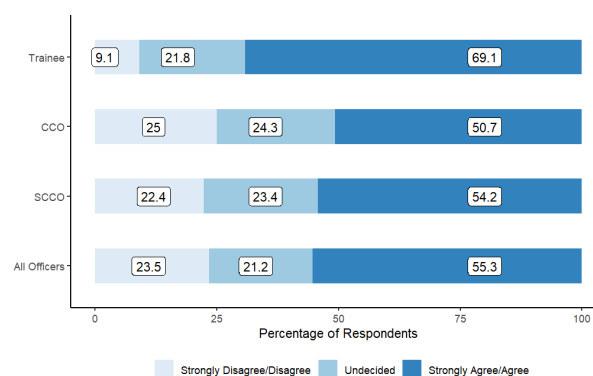

Figure 3. Officers' agreement with the statement that Practice Reviews helped improve the quality of written case notes (n = 306)

held more positive perceptions, with 76.4% of them indicating agreement or strong agreement when compared to CCOs and SCCOs (58.6 and 58.9%).

Figure 3 shows that about 55.3% of the surveyed officers showed agreement or strong agreement that Practice Reviews helped improved the quality of their written case notes. Again, Trainees were observed to be more positive (69.1% showed strong agreement or agreement) when compared with CCOs (50.7%) and SCCOs (54.2%).

Feedback

Figures 4 and 5 show that, in general, survey repondents held positive perceptions of the feedback process provided after Interview Observations and Practice Reviews. Among all respondents, 75.6% agreed or strongly agreed that the feedback they had received from Interview Observations was strengths-based and constructive, and 65.4% gave similar ratings in relation to the feedback they had received from Practice Reviews

Differences in perceptions between CCO positions were again observed, with Trainees being the most positive about the feedback received. In particular, Trainees highly valued the feedback from Interview Observations, with 90% indicating agreement or strong agreement that the feedback they received were strengths-based and constructive. In comparison, 72.9% of CCOs and 70.0% of SCCOs felt the same.

Perceptions of the feedback received from Practice Reviews were slightly less positive than Interview Observations but more consistent among the different roles, with 74.1% of Trainees, 65.3% of CCOs and 61.3% of SCCOs indicating agreement or strong agreement that feedback received as part of Practice Reviews were strengths based and constructive.
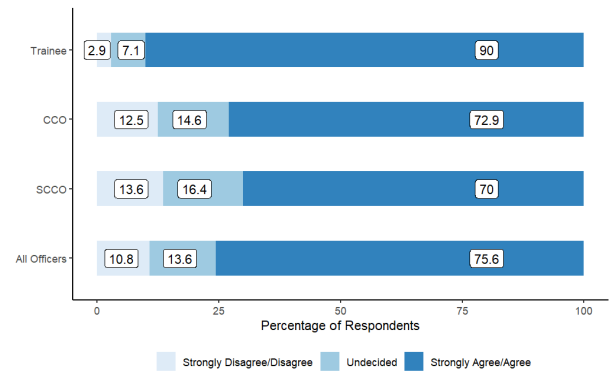

Figure 4. Officers' agreement with the statement that feedback received as part of Interview Observations were strengths based and constructive (n = 324)
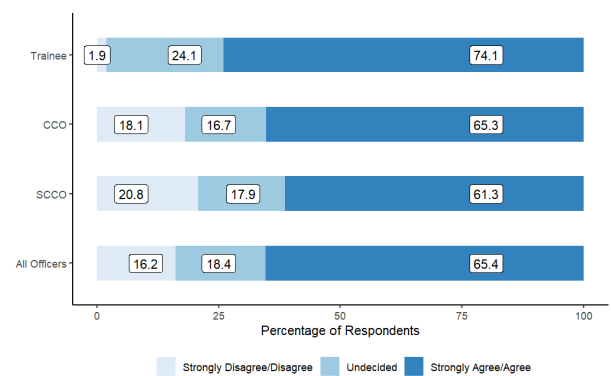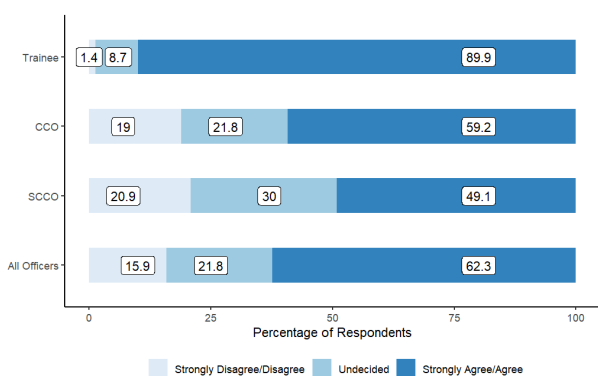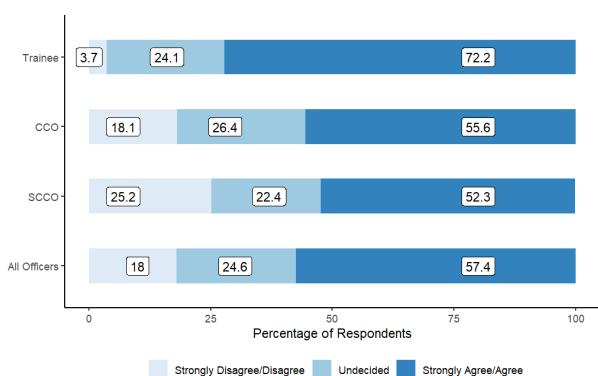

Figure 5. Officers' agreement with the statement that feedback received as part of Practice Reviews were strengths based and constructive (n = 304)

When asked if they were provided with adequate developmental support post feedback sessions, slightly more than half of the respondents indicated agreement or strong agreement (Interview Observations – 62.3%, Practice Reviews – 57.4%, see Figures 6 and 7). Difference in perceptions were again observed between roles, with Trainees showing the most positive responses. About 89.9% of Trainees agreed or strongly agreed that they felt supported after Interview Observations while only 59.2% of CCOs and 49.1% of SCCOs felt the same. As for Practice Reviews, 72.2% of Trainees, 55.6% of CCOs and 52.3% of SCCOs felt supported after receiving feedback.

Figure 6. Officers' agreement with the statement that officers were provided with support after participating in Interview Observations (n = 321)

Figure 7. Officers' agreement with the statement that officers were provided with support after participating in Practice Reviews (n = 305)

Unit Leaders

Unlike the mixed perceptions observed in the officer survey, Unit Leaders reported more uniformly positive views of the ongoing QA processes. They noted that the introduction of the QA processes led to a qualitative shift in their work to one that invests in the quality and improvement of their officers' skills by giving Unit Leaders a formal platform to provide constructive feedback to their officers and help CCOs keep track of their skills and developmental goals.

"And since practice reviews were fully incorporated and utilised as what they should be, … they're being done as a full practice review with a proper feedback conversation, goals to move forward, and then revisiting those at the next one. Since that process has been implemented, I think the shift has definitely become, from a unit leader's perspective, certainly more about quality."

Unit Leaders further noted that, as the QA processes gave them deeper insights into the way their officers work, they are better able to coordinate with Practice Managers in the development of workshop content and one-to-one training that is of direct relevance to their officers.

"Yes, if I have a CCO that's struggling with something particularly in a practice review…[I gave the feedback that they] need to book in a session…with the Practice Manager. So they could sit down in an individual session to talk to them about that particular PGI or whatever… So yes, stuff like that we're identifying [can be incorporated into] the monthly trainings. [This is] really good, [and it] helps. All those little things."

Although Unit Leaders generally had positive perceptions of the QA processes, some of them shared that they had encountered negative experiences in post-QA feedback sessions with their more experienced officers. They expressed concerns that some of their officers perceived the QA as a performance management tool, rather than as a tool for skill development. One interviewee noted that this misperception was reinforced by the language used in QA sessions, which is similar to the language used in the Brush Farm Academy when assessing Trainees. That language evokes a strong sense of performance management and assessment, and Unit Leaders reported receiving feedback that senior officers felt undervalued or like they were being reassessed for work that they were already qualified to perform and had performed on a business-as-usual basis prior to introduction of the QA processes.

Are the QA processes being implemented as intended? What are the current facilitators and barriers to delivery?

Frequency of QA

At the time of data collection, CCOs were required to complete at least one Interview Observation and one Practice Review every six months. Interviewed Unit Leaders reported that on average, they were meeting this mandatory requirement. Many Unit Leaders reported that they were conducting the QA processes more frequently, at least once per month on average, depending on the needs of the officer. This finding appears to be indicative of state-wide operations, as 87% of the CCO survey respondents indicated that their most recent Interview Observation and Practice Review sessions were conducted less than six months before the time of the survey.

Facilitators to QA delivery

Practice Manager support

From the interviews, it was clear that Practice Managers[3], played a key role throughout all phases of the QA rollout, from early implementation to providing ongoing support in the current business-as-usual delivery phase. Unit Leaders were generally positive about the Practice Review and feedback delivery training that was provided by their Practice Managers.

> "I think what's helped as well, which I was really glad about, is the Practice Manager sitting with you and doing a practice review, so I provided him with a couple of [CCO] names, and us having that opportunity to do the practice reviews and then to come back and talk about it, I found that really useful and really helpful."

Practice Review Database

The Practice Review Database is a new online database system which replaced the pre-existing method (Microsoft Excel and Word document templates) of completing Practice Reviews. This new Database is accessible via a web browser-based interface and replaced the requirement for Officers to upload the Practice Review documents for record keeping.

Unit Leaders identified the Database to be a key facilitator in helping them deliver Practice Reviews by substantially streamlining the process. Unit Leaders described the Database as a very helpful tool that assists with planning sessions and organising information in a way which allows them to have an at-a-glance view of how their officers' skills were developing across multiple reviews.

Tailoring feedback to officers

Unit Leaders who had positive experiences in delivering feedback to their officers noted that they found it beneficial to be mindful of their officers' working styles and preferred method of feedback delivery. For example, some officers may prefer more direct feedback while others may be more receptive to encouraging and positive feedback. Unit Leaders also noted that they had to be strategic in the feedback they gave. For example, they felt that better outcomes were achieved by breaking an overarching goal into smaller ones and helping their officers identify achievable objectives that can be addressed one step at a time.

Nevertheless, several Unit Leaders felt that the provision of additional training on how to structure and give constructive feedback would be beneficial for them. They also expressed views that additional guidance and training should be provided to help

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[3] Practice Managers are a team who provide ongoing support and training to supervising officers in their delivery of the PGI.

encourage objectivity and consistency between offices and Unit Leaders in how the different components of the QA processes are scored and reviewed.

Barriers to QA delivery

Staff resistance

Staff resistance appears to be one of the main challenges faced when conducting QA processes. This was, in part, related to some staffs' perception that the QA procedures are a form of performance management or assessment that is used to critique officers' work rather than as a tool for positive skills development. While resistance to the QA process and feedback was particularly strong among more experienced CCOs, some interviewees stressed the need for all levels of staff to understand the purpose and rationale of the QA processes.

"Our role is quality assurance, and making sure our staff are doing the right job. And training and mentoring our staff, I think, is critical. But as I said before, if the Unit Leaders don't understand why, then it's not going to work."

Other forms of resistance were seen to stem from the more experienced officers' perception that QAs are not effective in initiating change and that supervision practice will inadvertently revert to the way it was before QA processes were implemented.

"But I have seen some of the more experienced officers, who aren't on my team right now, and they're like, "oh, this is just a complete waste of time, we're going to say the same things and get the same outcomes and nothing's going to change and I've got people to see."

Time constraints and workload implications

Most Unit Leaders felt that the introduction of the QA processes led to an increase in their workload, which scales depending on the number of officers they supervise. As such, Unit Leaders commonly noted

that they had faced challenges in meeting delivery deadlines.

When asked about what the challenges to timely delivery were, Unit Leaders mentioned that Interview Observations have to be planned well in advance so that all parties involved, including the supervisee, supervising officer and Unit Leader, are present. Gathering the quorum required can be challenging due to scheduling conflicts, especially with those who have difficulties with time management. This issue was further exacerbated by the increased flexibility in supervision with the availability of phone supervision arrangements introduced during COVID-19. Practice Reviews, while not requiring the coordination of multiparty schedules, are attention demanding and time-consuming analytical work which requires a conducive environment and a high level of focus from Unit Leaders.

"It's not something you can do in the office, you need to be able to reflect without the background noise and actually analyse the case note and the theme with the supervision, and I do find that quite hard to do in the office environment."

Nevertheless, despite the increase in workload, Unit Leaders tended to be positive about the QA processes as they see value in the work required.

"It's a lot more work, I guess, going forward and that's okay … we're more at the table, if you like, with the team, thinking what are they trying to achieve, what are we doing, that sort of stuff. So, in that sense, that's positive and there has been a big push towards quality rather than just a numbers game."

DISCUSSION

The current study aims to understand staff perceptions of the ongoing QA processes that were introduced to help develop competencies in delivering the PGI. The data examined in this report was collected as part of a larger study involving the

administration of a state-wide online survey administered to Community Corrections supervising officers and semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of Unit Leaders (see Cassidy et al., 2023).

Results from the surveys indicated generally positive views of QA processes and acceptance of these processes into operational best practice for the PGI among supervising officers. However, there was a clear pattern of outcomes whereby trainee CCOs tended to hold more favourable views of QA processes compared to CCOs and Senior CCOs. Consistent with this, a number of Unit Leaders reported that they had encountered some challenges in the form of resistance when conducting QAs with their more experienced staff. It is possible that these results partly reflect the relative benefits of continuous skills development depending on the experience of the officer; however, there were also indications that they are a function of differing attitudes across staff. For example, Unit Leaders suggested that more experienced officers felt the QA processes undervalued them or reassessed them for their roles as a potential form of performance management rather than continuous improvement. A related finding is that officers' resistance to the PGI has recently been attributed to perceived focus on managing and meeting KPIs as opposed to quality of service delivery (Cassidy et al., 2023). Similar results were observed after the initial implementation of the PGI (Thaler et al., 2019), suggesting that management of these factors continue to be relevant and extend to QA processes in particular as well as the PGI more generally.

Feedback from staff identified some more practical avenues for continuous improvement that may have a bearing on broader perspectives or attitudes towards the QA processes. In particular, officers often felt that there was a lack of developmental support and follow-through after the QA processes. From the survey, we found that close to half of the surveyed officers did not feel supported after participating in the QA processes. A related theme that emerged from the interviews is the potential need for more advanced training for both officers and Unit Leaders. The development of formal post-QA support structures, such as the provision of advanced skills training or other means of facilitating staff professional development, may help reinforce perceptions of the QA as a developmental support tool. Several Unit Leaders also recognised that tailoring feedback to officers was crucial and felt that the provision of training on how to structure and give constructive feedback may further facilitate feedback discussions with officers. The ability to provide feedback that is effective, motivational and engaging may help reduce resistance from staff.

The results also highlight the importance of ongoing departmental communications to clarify the objectives and benefits of QA processes for staff. It is possible that related communications and activities could be enhanced by emphasising how QA processes relate to aims of collaborative skills development, as opposed to performance management, in supervisory relationships. Recognising that delivery of PGI may require an advanced skillset that in turn would benefit from an evolving conceptualisation and skillset of staff supervision, such communications may be facilitated by the training initiatives described above.

When compared to supervising officers, Unit Leaders tended to hold more consistently positive views about the QA processes. Although Unit Leaders felt that the introduction of QA processes had increased their workload, many of them felt that these processes were a fundamental component of their role, and some Unit Leaders welcomed this increase in workload due to the perceived added value that it brings to their officers and those under supervision. Unit Leaders expressed beliefs that introduction of the QA processes led to a positive shift in their roles from a more traditional team management role

towards one that is about improving the quality of service delivery through staff mentoring, development and capacity building. Unit Leaders further noted that the QA processes gave them deeper insights into the way their officers work, which helped them coordinate with Practice Managers in the development of workshop content and one-to-one training. A possible explanation for differences in perspectives of QA processes across staff groups is that these processes have broader value in supporting strategic decision making, which is more directly apparent to senior staff such as Unit Leaders.

We acknowledge that there are some limitations to this study. Both the survey and interviews relied on voluntary participation and may therefore be subject to self-selection bias. As such, the views collated in this study may be skewed towards those who hold strong opinions about the PGI. Another related limitation is the risk where staff may choose not to respond to questions that they felt an honest response may be detrimental to them; or respond in a manner that they feel will be perceived favourably by others. These response biases are difficult to identify and can interfere with the interpretation of the topics examined in this study. Planned follow-up studies are intended to further contribute to the evidence base by applying quantitative analysis of administrative data to examine whether adherence to QA processes is associated with improved supervision outcomes.

In sum, this study provides insights into how the QA processes for the PGI have been implemented and received by staff. Overall, Community Corrections staff appear to be receptive of these processes and have positive perspectives of their utility. This study also identified some preliminary indicators of good uptake and buy-in of QA processes from staff, including frequent delivery of related activities. As supervising officers' skills in delivering the PGI further develop, an intended consequence is that this

will translate into improved services for people who are supervised in the community. Given the recognised importance of quality of service delivery for the effectiveness of behaviour change interventions (e.g., Bonta et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012), ongoing utilisation and development of QA processes as part of the PGI model have promising implications for supervision outcomes, which will be examined in following studies.

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Sept 2021	Process evaluation of the Custody Based Intensive Treatment (CUBIT) program for sex-offenders: Within-treatment change
Sept 2021	Impact Evaluation of the Gurnang Life Challenge Specialised Program for Young Adult Male Offenders in NSW
June 2021	Evaluation of Custodial Case Management (CCM): The Planning for Adjustment, Responsivity, Reintegration, Criminogenic Needs, and Communication (PARRCC) Assessment Tool