

## **BBC Radio 4 Today**

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Probation Service – Lorna, Angie Kennedy, Diana Fulbrook, Tom Weedon

**James Naughtie, presenter:** Just over a week ago Danno Sonnex and Nigel Farmer were sentenced to life for murdering two French students in an attack in south London. After the trial it emerged that Sonnex would have been in jail at the time of the killings had it not been for a series of failings by agencies in the criminal justice system - in particular the probation service – while the head of the London Probation Service, David Scott, resigned. So how do probation staff go about monitoring violent and high risk offenders? In the first of a series about the work that probation staff do, our home affairs correspondent, Danny Shaw, reports from Wiltshire.

**Danny Shaw, home affairs correspondent:** 26 November 2004 is the date that changed the life of a woman from Wiltshire.

**Lorna:** It was discovered that my husband had been downloading child pornography on the computer.

**Danny Shaw:** Did that come completely out of the blue, was it a complete shock when you got the knock on the door?

**Lorna:** Yeah, it was a shock. I didn't ever think that would happen in my house.

**Danny Shaw:** To protect the woman's identity we're using a made-up name, Lorna, and have disguised her voice. When police began their investigation, Lorna and her husband had been married for five years and had a young child. He eventually admitted offences of possessing indecent images of children and was jailed for more than three years. On his conviction his probation officer, Angie Kennedy, got in touch with Lorna.

**Angie Kennedy, probation officer:** What she wanted the probation service to know is that whatever he tells me as his officer she does not believe that he will ever let her go, and that she wanted us to be aware of that so that we could help manage that in terms of risk.

**Danny Shaw:** It proved to be quite a task. Lorna and her husband had divorced and he was banned from contacting their child. But he bombarded Lorna with abusive letters from prison and continued to harass her on his release. It was probation that Lorna turned to and probation who secured the offender's return to jail.

**Angie Kennedy:** Lorna rang me and said that she had received some very abusive text messages. He was saying that he had a knife and it was felt that he was likely to go round

to the property, on the basis of the content of the text messages, and we felt that recall was inevitable because there was a potential risk that he was going to harm her and her child.

**Lorna:** They've just been very supportive throughout all of this. I think the biggest thing was when my husband had to be recalled, but as soon as I notified them that he'd breached they did everything they can and made sure that myself and my child was safe.

**Danny Shaw:** Probation officers liaise with victims in every case where a violent or sexual offender is jailed for a year or more. It's one of the lesser known aspects of probation work but vital to understanding and managing risk. Offenders under supervision are put into one of four categories of risk and in Wiltshire, as in most areas, the priority is to manage those in the highest grouping – 250 out of a caseload of 1,700. The county's chief probation officer, Diana Fulbrook.

**Diana Fulbrook, Chief Probation Officer, Wiltshire:** We have to be constantly vigilant about risk factors raising themselves, and you have to work with other agencies to share information and to piece things together. Whenever a case goes badly wrong it's very often that piecing together of information did not take place properly.

**Tom Weedon, Senior Practitioner, National Probation Service, Wiltshire:** And this is the case file of an offender we work with, who's in prison since the age of 15, and he was a high risk, he was a very high risk, very high risk offender to both staff and the public.

**Danny Shaw:** Tom Weedon has worked in probation for 20 years. When serious crimes are committed by offenders under supervision, he says, it's often by those classed as low or medium risk. One of the men convicted of murdering the French students in London, Danno Sonnex, was in the medium risk category. Tom Weedon told me there are carefully structured procedures for probation staff to follow in order to assess risk, such as the computer based system OASIS, and multi-agency meetings, but he denies the process is too bureaucratic. All this isn't a box-ticking exercise?

**Tom Weedon:** No, it's not certainly a box-ticking exercise, it's a process we go through to... in order to help us manage the risk of a case.

**Danny Shaw:** It's about covering yourself then, is it?

**Tom Weedon:** It's not just... it's not about covering yourself, it's also about managing the risk that person may present to the public.

**Danny Shaw:** The goal is to get an offender safely through their licence period. Progress is achieved if their offending behaviour has stopped or is less serious than before. But not all offenders who pledge to reform their ways manage to. More than half of those released from prison or given a community order are reconvicted within two years. In the world of probation there are no certainties. The phrase that's repeated over and over again by probation staff is that risk can never be eliminated.

**James Naughtie, presenter:** Danny Shaw reporting.

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