

Delivering desistance-focused probation in community hubs: five key ingredients

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Delivering desistance-focused probation in community hubs: five key ingredients

Abstract

This article argues that probation is well placed to facilitate desistance when delivered in community hubs – community-based offices where probation services are colocated with other community-based provision. However, we highlight that hubs need to include certain key factors in order to maximise the potential for desistance. Using data collected through a piece of empirical research in six community hubs in England and Wales we identify what factors make for a ‘good’ community hub as perceived by staff who work in them, those subject to supervision via a hub and managers with strategic responsibility for commissioning hub services. We consider what it is about those factors which facilitate desistance-focused practice as outlined by McNeill et al's (2012) eight principles of desistance-focussed practice. The five key factors identified in this study are: the location of a hub; the hub’s physical environment; the extent to which services are co-located/produced; the cultural context of the hub; and the need for leaders to be innovative in the way services are commissioned. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for the National Probation Service as it takes over the work of Community Rehabilitation Companies in the coming years.

Introduction

Since the implementation of Transforming Rehabilitation in 2014, Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC) have made concerted efforts to make greater use of community hubs to deliver probation services. Although all hubs vary slightly, they tend to be premises in which more than just probation providers are situated to enable service users to access a greater range of services as part of their Order or period on Licence. For example, the operating model of the now defunct Working Links relied on community hubs (Dominey, 2018) and Durham Tees Valley CRC uses hubs to deliver much of its work with service users (Ellis, 2017). Other CRC owners have made greater use of hubs, especially when it comes to delivering services to minority groups such as women although others – such as Mabgate Mills in Leeds - have closed down. In spite of the increased use of hubs in the probation landscape, very little research has sought to understand whether and how they improve probation practice and even less has considered what makes for a good community hub. Thus, this article presents data on what probation providers need to consider when commissioning community hub provision

What do we already know about hub-based probation practice?

A community hub is 'a place where agencies (including the CRC) share premises and other facilities, pooling resources to offer a holistic service' (Dominey, 2018: 5). Durham and Tees Valley CRC (2015) describes hubs as:

spaces where participants come to see their Responsible Officer whilst on a community order or licence. Within the Hubs participants also have access to additional support offered by Volunteers and Peer Mentors as well as signposting information for additional support from partnership agencies for example Education and Training, Finances, Health and Housing.

There are several rationales for introducing community hubs in the post-Transforming Rehabilitation probation landscape. The overarching rationale to using hubs given by providers is that hubs enable people subject to probation supervision to benefit from a multi-agency approach while meeting the requirements of their court order or licence. On the other hand, they can enable probation providers to deliver a service without the need for expensive service user facing offices and interview rooms, thus continuing a longstanding trend in probation of estate rationalisation (Bottoms, 2008) and being a cover for the need to cut costs in a privatised sector.

There has been little research on the use of community hubs. Dominey (2018: 5) cites Watkins' (2016) unpublished research which found 'promising indications that community hubs were improving the delivery of offender supervision and encouraging engagement and compliance'. Ellis (2017) found that many participants were initially uneasy at the prospect of hub-based working but eventually came to value hub-based work. Dominey's (2018) study of three hubs in CRCs found that the skills of staff working in a hub are paramount to the way it functions and that service users valued the relationships which were developed. She found that hub-based working increased service user awareness of other agencies, co-location made accessing other services easier and hub-based probation delivery improved relations between staff in different organisations. On the other hand, there were some concerns around privacy and confidentiality (which were also raised by participants in Ellis's (2017) study). Finally – and importantly – Dominey (2018: 35) highlights the potential for community hubs to 'make community links that will last beyond their contact with the CRC', something we return to later in the context of our own study.

What sets hubs apart from traditional probation offices is the physical environment in which delivery takes place which raises questions about the extent to which probation engages with the community it serves. A focus on risk management and public protection has alienated probation practitioners from the community they serve (Senior, 2013). Hubs allow for collaboration between

organisations and CRCs as a response to keeping the public safe, facilitating the sharing of information and joined up support which, in turn, is based on the axiomatic role of the helping 'relationship' in supporting desistance. The location of the hubs in the communities they serve represents the intention to meet local needs. These ideas meet Senior's (2013) notion of 'community engagement' and relates to the notion of community justice which encapsulates a number of other concepts such as social inclusion, reintegration, restorative justice, belief in the possibility of change, the role of social capital in desistance that constitutes many of the values of probation (Canton, 2011).

Thus, we also need to consider the location of probation offices as well as the way in which they engage with people on supervision. In Shah's (2015) study the physical appearance of the office – and thus the presence of parolees - was hidden from the larger community. This could be to protect parolees, but it also suggests a tendency to reassure the public that they are being protected. Shah's concerns about parole offices supporting reintegration and the development of social capital in communities with high levels of need resonates with notions of 'community engagement' and 'community justice'. Shah (2020) argues that probation offices (albeit in the US) maintain community corrections as a public secret, thus potentially perpetuating the retreat from the community that we have also witnessed in the English and Welsh context.

The physical environment in which probation is delivered is also important. Research has focused on the way in which the 'architecture' of a probation office shapes practice. For example, Phillips (2014) focuses on the way in which the architecture of the probation office in which he conducted his research reflected policy concerns of risk management. Irwin-Rogers (2017) points to the importance of the physical layout of Approved Premises in which a more open, inclusive layout enhances the potential for positive relations. Tidmarsh's (2019) argues that the managerial tendencies observed in a privatised probation service had filtered into the design of the building and thus influenced practice. Although this is a small body of knowledge, the physical environment in which probation is delivered should not be discounted. This is particularly important considering Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation reports have highlighted serious problems with some of the premises in the NPS including 'faulty plumbing, broken lifts, vermin infestations, general lack of maintenance' (HMI Probation, 2019: 44)

This present study explicitly sought to understand the extent to which hub-based probation practice can facilitate desistance. Theories of desistance accept that the process of desistance is neither quick nor easy (Phillips, 2017). Although early desistance research was focused more on understanding the process than about generating policy, there has – understandably - been calls for this now

considerable body of evidence to be translated into criminal justice policy (McNeill, 2006). That said, probation cannot 'cause' desistance. Rather, probation can have a role in creating the conditions which make desistance more likely (King, 2013). Thus, we make use of McNeill et al.'s (2012, p. 2) eight principles of desistance focussed practice to explore the ways in which practice in community hubs adheres to them (see ANONYMISED FOR REVIEW). These are:

- Being realistic about the complexity and difficulty of the process
- Building and sustaining hope
- Recognising and developing people's strengths
- Respecting and fostering agency (or self-determination)
- Working with and through relationships (both personal and professional)
- Recognising and celebrating progress
- Individualising support for change
- Developing social as well as human capital

In the course of our research we also identified a set of factors which seemed to make this type of work more likely to occur and it is here where we focus our attention in this article.

Methods

The data analysis presented in this article were generated through fieldwork at six community hubs in a study commissioned, funded and published by HMI Probation. The research presented here was part of a wider study undertaken by HMI Probation on the use of community hubs in probation. The wider project was approved by the National Research Committee, and Sheffield Hallam University's Faculty Ethics Committee. Access was facilitated by HMI Probation and then approved by relevant gatekeepers within each CRC. We adopted a mixed methodology design which comprised interviews and observations in order to gain a deep understanding of what hubs do, how they work and what they achieve. We undertook research in a range of different hubs which served different populations because one aim of this research was to explore differences between hubs and so we decided to aim for a range of hub types. The sites were chosen following a survey of all CRCs undertaken by HMI Probation prior to phase two of research being commissioned. The survey sought to understand which CRCs used hubs for the delivery of probation services and identify what services were made available through the hubs. The survey identified over 46 hubs spread over the seven CRCs which responded (see Phillips et al (2020) for an overview of the survey results). Although only a partial picture, the findings were useful in terms of identifying which CRCs provided services to different hubs and provided an initial point of contact when identifying research sites. The sites were split

between rural (Sites 1 and 5), city centre (Site 2, 3 and 4) and large towns (Site 6). Sites 3 and 4 both served female only service users and site 5 served only men, as it was situated outside a prison to support men immediately upon release. The hubs we visited were all slightly different in terms of how they were governed, what services they provided and how well embedded in the community they were. This heterogeneity in the sites means we have been able to identify the hubs in which staff found it easier to deliver desistance-focused practice. All research sites have been fully anonymised.

To ensure consistency of data collection, one member of the research team visited all six research sites and was accompanied by another member of the research team on each visit. Data were collected in two primary ways: interviews/focus groups and observational data collection which focused more on the hub's environment. In order to get a broad range of perspectives and experiences we spoke to service users, frontline staff, managers and, where relevant, volunteers. The interviews were semi-structured to enable consistency across the researchers and sites but also allowing for flexibility. Across the six sites, we spoke to 74 participants. We interviewed 21 CRC staff, 7 employees of voluntary sector organisations and one member of the NPS. We also interviewed 38 interviews service users and undertook seven interviews with people in strategic positions. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. For the purposes of this article we focused on participants' answers to our questions about what was particularly good about the hub. This process resulted in the five themes discussed below.

What makes for a 'good' hub and why?

The primary aims of this research were to understand the ways in which hub-based probation delivery can facilitate desistance and to identify what makes for a 'good' community hub. Not all the hubs we visited were able to deliver desistance-focused practice to the same extent. This was partly a product of the aims of the hub. For example, Site 5 – situated outside a prison – was intended to act as a first point of call for people being released from prison. What follows is an analysis of how the hubs enabled desistance focused practice and so Site 5, for example features less than the other Sites. Thus, this is not a criticism of Site 5 – rather, the range of hub types included in our sample means we could use them as heuristic devices for considering what it was about a particular hub – or mode of delivery - which was conducive to desistance focused practice.

Location

A key theme that we identified was the importance of the location of the hub. A city centre location was seen as a real advantage to our participants:

Responsible Officer1: It's city centre, so yes. Most people that we support live in and around the [city] area.

RO1: the amount of women who say, 'It's two buses up to [Main] Road. You've no chance of getting me up there.' That's the difference. [The hub] is one bus journey away.

RO2: And then if they're in [the city] and they have to go to the Jobcentre or housing, that's all in the centre of [the city] as well, for a lot of them. (CRC staff, site 3)

Being in a city centre location enabled service users to attend more easily and overcomes one of the key practical problems to compliance (Ugwudike and Phillips, 2019). Whilst this may only increase formal compliance in the first instance, more contact with service users makes future substantive compliance more likely (Robinson and McNeill, 2008). Prior to TR the Probation Trust which covered Site 3 had two offices – one in the city centre, and one out of the city. After TR the NPS took over the city centre office and the CRC inhabited the out of town office. Site 1 was in a rural location a long way from the nearest probation office in the nearest town and the hub made a real difference to journey times for service users.

However, Site 4 was situated out of the city centre in a dedicated building for female service users. On the one hand this could have negative consequences because it was harder to reach by public transport. However, the fact that the hub was not in the 'normal' probation office meant service users felt less stigma at attending here. As one responsible officer told us, this was appreciated by service users:

'You know what? I'm so made up to be coming here now,' she said, 'rather than do that walk of shame.' And I said, 'What do you mean walk of shame?' So, she said, 'Well, when I used to go to [Fargate], walking down [Walton] Road, I always used to feel like it was the walk of shame going to Probation. (CRC staff, site 4)

This confirms other research into the provision of probation services for women in 'one stop shops' which suggests that this is how women prefer to access probation (Dominey, 2018; Hedderman et al., 2011). This links with the idea that desistance-focused probation practice should build and sustain hope. People are more likely to desist when they have 'feelings of hope and self-efficacy, and a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives' (Maruna and Mann, 2019: 7). Participants told us that delivery through the hubs was less stigmatising than through traditional probation offices. In turn, this enabled service users to adopt a more positive, hopeful, outlook on life and the future. Indeed, this was seen as a real strength of hub-based delivery as it holds the potential to 'remove that label

and of them thinking very much of themselves as an offender and trying to just have them engage as a woman in that group' (CRC staff, site 3). This was also reflected in service users' accounts:

I don't feel such a stigma coming here as I did going to probation in [City] because, like I said, people just assume you're there because you are a criminal and basically yes, I am here for a criminal purpose but I'm not actually a criminal. People just assume, so it's not so suspect, if you know what I mean. (Service user, site 1)

You don't get a sticker going 'you're on probation'. (Service user, site 1)

The location of a hub can both enable improved compliance but also contributes to reduced levels of stigma by situating contact outside of traditional probation offices. It is thus linked to what we know about how people's identity changes as they desist from offending, especially in terms of the relationship between a stigmatised identity and a non-stigmatised identity (Stone, 2016).

Environment

Existing research has explored the ways in which the office environment can shape probation practice (Phillips, 2014; Tidmarsh, 2019). Our findings suggest that environment can also play an important role in how service users experience probation. Notwithstanding the fact that hubs involve a much wider range of services and the hubs we visited were all, to varying degrees, purpose built or - at least - designed as community hubs. As a result, the physical environment came up frequently in our discussions with practitioners and service users.

The working relationship between a probation officer and their client has long been recognised as a key tool in the probation officer's armoury that can assist desistance (Burnett and McNeill, 2005). Moreover, familial relationships and ties have been described as the golden thread that should run through criminal justice interventions because they support the development of a non-offending lifestyle and identity (Farmer, 2017). Hubs provide opportunities for service users to experience a different relational experience that is not based on their offending history, but on their skills, passions and interests.

The staff with whom we spoke talked at length about how being in a hub has improved the relationships with their clients. All sites facilitated probation meetings in a less formal environment, conducive to fostering trust and putting the service user at ease:

I think the environment. ... I think it makes them feel more valued. Hopefully it's quite a calm environment. They don't feel, certainly with the traditional probation office, you go in and you're really, because some of them don't like to think that they're like the

person sitting next to them who's a proper offender and they're not. You've got a mix of people in the waiting room. We don't keep them waiting in the waiting room that long. They can see if we're in because it's all open. As soon as you go into the probation office, there's just a screen and you speak through a little hole in the screen. (CRC staff, site 1)

Building up a relationship with an individual, it's a more relaxed environment. It's not more relaxed in what we're discussing but it feels more relaxed. (CRC staff, site 3)

The hubs were also well positioned to facilitate the creation of mutually supportive relationships between service users.

But I've met people in that room [waiting room] and I don't know where the foodbank is and they do, so then we get together. Now a couple of us are boxing down the beach, because we were in a bad place the year we got out and yeah, like four or five of us box under the pier like three times a week. (Service user, site 6)

In addition, hubs were designed to encourage family relationships, with spacious and welcoming communal areas. Sites 2 and 3 encouraged families to socialise in the communal areas. Site 5 had tea and coffee making facilities and a small waiting area where family members could wait or join in their induction.

Service users also recognised the potential for hubs to enable more interaction between family members and probation:

Well, it's important to me because this was my first time offending so all of this stuff is really new to me and to my family and there's lots of things that both me and my family don't understand so I said to my dad the other day when I was trying to explain about what I was doing ... Because I knew it's such a big space here and I know that you've got those booths as well I thought, well, I know my dad could come along and have a chat as well and kind of be involved which is obviously really important to me...so that he can understand it. (Service user, site 2)

In Sites 1 and 2 the welcome team approach made the whole experience less like visiting a probation office and more like seeking support:

It's less enforcement centre. You go back to [Main] Road, you walk through the door there, it's a bit like banks used to be, there's a counter, a Perspex screen from the top of the counter to the ceiling, microphones and all that. So, here we don't have any of that,

it's just you walk in, your meeter and greeter will see people, sit them down and, if they want probation, we're here to help. (CRC staff, site 2)

Even in Site 4 where probation had its own separate area in the building the environment was considered important:

I think it's a lot easier for the women to adapt to that, especially the women who are coming out of prison, it's much more user friendly. We've got an open reception, it's more welcoming. Probation offices can be very male dominated anyway. It's all behind screens, we have turnstiles getting in and out of probation which in itself is a barrier, just going through the turnstiles, they don't work halfway through, they stop, so it's all the uncomfortableness for the women going in to those centres where here it's an open reception, you're greeted well, you can make a cup of tea, it's just got a nicer feeling to it really. (CRC staff, site 3)

Our participants suggested that the design of the building - the openness, cleanliness and good decor all conveyed a sense of respect which did not occur in more traditional offices. Again, the comments here reinforce other research on women's experiences of accessing probation in a hub environment (Plechowicz, 2015) although this does not mean that men would not also benefit from such forms of delivery. The hubs were a far cry from what one normally associates with a probation office although this is not to suggest that none of this type of work does or can occur in a traditional office. Rather, there are lessons here for all forms of provision: delivering probation in environments which are in good condition conveys a more positive message to the service user: a message of recognition and humanity rather than one which designates the service user as a poser of risk and little more (Phillips, 2014). Such a message – we would argue – works to facilitate desistance because it recognises the strengths that service users possess regardless of their offending status. There are thus links here to the Good Lives Model approach to working with people who have offended, in that there is an implicit recognition of the value that people have regardless of their offending status (Ward and Brown, 2004).

Interestingly, other research in this area has highlighted issues around confidentiality (Dominey, 2018; Ellis, 2017) but our participants did not see this as a notable problem. This may be because the hubs had environments which enabled private conversations to take place – with the exception of site 5, each hub at least one or two rooms which could be used for confidential meetings. This is an important lesson which can be taken beyond hub-based work and into any field of work which requires confidential conversations between practitioners and service users.

Colocation

The colocation of a range of services was seen as critical to being a good hub because it enabled staff to 'individualise support for change', considered one of the most important ways of delivering desistance-focused practice (McNeill et al, 2012). For example, Site 2 offered specialised support for veterans; Site 3 offered specialist support for refugees; and Site 4 had a trilingual volunteer who was able to support foreign nationals. While Site 5 did not run groups or activities within the hub, the hub formed part of a programme that started in the prison 12 weeks prior to release and involved one-stop shop support for release such as employment, housing and mental health support..

Service users across all sites were asked by probation if they needed other support putting in place and assisted individuals to access these if necessary. This approach recognises the importance of tailored support, specific to the needs of the service user:

I've always accessed probation through the hub, but I also use it for ...[the] drug and alcohol service and ... a mental health service. (Service user, site 2)

Indeed, the main way in which hubs can provide individualised support for change comes through the presence of a range of services based in the building and the improved referral processes that arise as a result:

I think the biggest thing is timeliness, so being able to refer someone quickly and knowledge of what is in the community because you've got partners working out of the building that you become familiar with and signposting because in a generic office you can refer in obviously.... So I think for me it's doing things quite quickly and the familiarity of staff with other staff in other agencies speeds up the process. (CRC staff, site 1)

Sites 1, 2 and 3 all provided a wide range of services which supported service users with needs that were much broader than simply 'criminogenic' needs. One participant characterised the way in which hubs provide individualised support for change as 'holistic but targeted'. Site 5 primarily provided services that targeted criminogenic needs, such as, housing or employment, rather than providing support associated with desistance focused outcomes. Hub-based probation work provides opportunities for practice which takes an individual's needs into account.

Colocation also seemed to create a more positive experience for service users, thus working to build and sustain hope:

I can get off from seeing [my probation officer] and go and see the careers woman. I usually get up and bounce around the whole room, like go and see them all and try and achieve something, whether it be a job search or I've got issues with housing or something like that... When they are all there, like all the networks are there. So life can't touch me at the moment. (Service user, site 6)

Colocation also allows for practice which reflects the difficult and unpredictable nature of many people's desistance journeys (Phillips, 2017). Participants in our study suggested that being based in a hub enabled a more flexible approach to the inevitable lapses that occur when someone is in the process of desisting. This was important given that service users often led chaotic lives and came from backgrounds which left them with vulnerabilities. This seemed particularly relevant for female service users:

They could be more complex sometimes and things like childcare responsibilities. A lot of them are single parents so that presents barriers and financial issues. (CRC Staff, Site 4)

I mean most of mine are still stuck on the first stage crisis but with the other resources I would hope that eventually they may move down... (NPS staff, Site 2)

These difficulties, staff suggested, manifested in terms of struggling to attend appointments at set times. In these circumstances, the open-door policy associated with hub-based work was a real benefit because it allowed some leeway towards attendance that may be less available in more traditional offices. In the hubs where each service user has a responsible officer employed by probation as well as a key worker employed by the hub it meant that the service user could see their keyworker and that this could count as attending. According to staff participants, this reduced the need for initiating breach proceedings and enabled service users to engage with services which suited their needs. It would also mean that probation staff could fulfil risk assessment and supervision duties, meet the rehabilitative needs of service users and fulfil responsibilities around safeguarding and safety, something which seemed particularly pertinent for those people working with women:

She's really vulnerable but she never comes in on her appointments but knows where the office is ... and she can come in whenever, even if it's just to get some clothes or use the washing machine or whatever. That's really useful... from a risk point of view and checking her safety. (CRC staff, site 3)

Service users also acknowledged the difficulties in the desistance process. Accessing probation through a hub helped them to overcome issues such as isolation, developing more pro-social relationships and spending time in healthier environments:

Yeah, I went to [my probation officer] and said just throw everything at me, I want it, I need it. Because otherwise I sit at home on my own with nothing but the telly on and my thoughts and it makes me worse. I need to get out. Even, I just come and sit here for the day and don't do anything, it's being around different people and it's a really healthy atmosphere here. (Service user, site 3)

This flexibility meant that when someone relapses, probation was in a strong position to respond appropriately with the services required by the individual. As the hubs had a mixture of services provided by statutory and third sector agencies, non-compliance became less of a barrier to accessing support. The nature of engagement in the hub means that setbacks and difficulties could be managed more effectively. The accessibility and convenience of the wide range of hub services made a difference to this participant's motivation to engage in the process of desistance, implicitly recognising the importance of a 'readiness to change' in practice:

So, I wouldn't go out of my way to – like I wouldn't come to probation then...walk another mile after probation to see National [Careers Service] – I wouldn't do it, I would just think 'Oh, fuck that, I ain't going now but having it all under one roof – it's the two birds with one stone scenario. As simple as that. I could resolve anything under this roof. (Service user, site 6)

McMurrin and Ward (2010) argue that motivation needs to be harnessed and enhanced throughout the delivery of a service, and hubs provide a way of addressing barriers to engagement. Colocation also enabled probation workers to recognise and celebrate progress in ways which would not occur in a more traditional probation office:

[Name] came up to see CAB, Citizens Advice and he waved, I say, oh, hiya. He said I've got a baby, so I came around talking to the baby. I said, do you know what – because he's a single dad now, I said you're doing a really good job, look at him, I'm really proud of you. He was like, you know. Because they'd never had it. All they've been told is you're rubbish, you'll never make anything, you're not going to be anything but he is, he's a single dad to a one year old baby. (CRC staff, site 1)

This type of interaction would rarely happen in a more traditional probation office. In Sites 1 and 2, designated welcome teams became familiar with service users, offering a friendly welcome to the

hub upon arrival. This welcoming ethos was an important aspect of the hub model and through building working relationships with service users; the welcome teams were also able to recognise positive potential and the development of service users.

However, the nature of the colocation was important. In Site 2 there was a fully integrated model of colocation in that staff from different agencies truly shared the space. This meant that probation clients were treated as equals when compared to other users of the hub. In Site 3, on the other hand, the CRC staff had separate offices which restricted communication and some staff described the way in which this physical barrier could cause issues. One such example revolved around the charity which ran the building closing it for a day and failing to inform the CRC. This presented issues for the probation staff with service users booked in. Whilst probation workers prioritise reporting appointments charities can have different priorities, pointing to tensions when the voluntary sector becomes involved in the delivery of penal policy (Tomczak and Thompson, 2017).

Communication in Site 2 was also hampered because some staff were based half time between the hub and CRC office. This meant they were less likely to know everything that was available in the hub, thus defeating one of its key strengths. For example, staff talked about how they only know what happens on the day they are in the hub:

I don't really know much about what else happens here, apart from what I deliver and who else is here on the day that I'm here. (CRC staff, site 1)

This was largely a product of the CRC utilising a combined model of delivery - using hubs whilst maintaining a traditional office. There is, thus, a case for aiming for a more integrated model of colocation as well as some joint ownership over the running of the building itself.

Cultural factors

The location, environment and colocation of services are all relatively practical issues. However, there are some cultural and strategic elements of community hub-based work which need considering. Delivering probation in a hub was seen by our participants to be a fundamentally different model of probation practice which, in turn, brought particular challenges. For example, in Site 1 staff discussed the cynicism of hub-based work that they faced from their colleagues in the traditional office:

One of our colleagues said on Tuesday see you tomorrow. I said oh, you won't see me, have a nice day. Oh, yeah, that's right, sunning yourself with your suntan cream sitting on a roof. (CRC staff, site 1)

Such tensions also arose in Site 3 where participants discussed the conflict between care and control, a longstanding debate in probation:

think that's one of the conflicts about it because we're asking them to come to appointments, they have to, it's part of their sentence alongside this holistic approach that everything else is there, so getting your hair done for free is lovely... But also you've committed an offence that you're being punished for and actually we need to do some work on that. (CRC staff, Site 3)

This, then, is an example of hub-based work can enable staff to see their clients as humans rather than offenders, an important underpinning principle to desistance approaches. One member of staff talked about how hub-based delivery was contingent upon good teamwork and implied that this is not how it works in more traditional probation offices:

We support each other. I think also you've got to have a team dynamic where they support each other. You can't have a team of individuals. You've got to support and help each other. You can't be, 'That's not my job. You've got to do it. That's not my job, I'm not doing that.' That wouldn't work. (CRC staff, site 2)

A different participant discussed how people have to want to work in a hub and that to force people to do so is counter-productive:

Staff who care, who want to be in the role and I know that that's not always the case because when [Name]'s been here he's said that there are some hubs, they're dragging people in there kicking and screaming because they really don't want to go and work in a hub. (CRC staff, site 1).

This reflects findings from Ellis's (2017) research where she observed similar difficulties around coming to terms with hub-based working. It seems to us that where probation providers want to implement more hub-based working this cultural shift needs to be borne in mind. As one manager put it, commissioning needs to start with getting everybody on board:

Collaboration and co-production, like a garden- needs constant tending- as it is human beings that make it work. (Strategic staff, site 2)

This does not only mean having buy-in from people from within probation but also from all relevant agencies to ensure the appropriate services are delivered:

Just make sure you've got everybody, you've done your strategic planning first and you've got everybody on board who needs to be because otherwise what will happen is, as we've seen in some of ours, your officers will just end up running around and doing everything. (Strategic staff, site 5)

These cultural factors – where everyone one is 'on board' with the hub – may present difficulties for probation where people have increasingly worked in silos in recent years (Moore and Hamilton, 2016; Robinson, 2016).

Innovation

Our final factor which is critical to a 'good' hub relates to commissioning arrangements. Participants in strategic positions highlighted their philosophy which began with the end of an Order:

It's key to commissioning: An exit strategy (Strategic staff, site 4)

Such a commissioning approach - which accepts the fact that probation cannot be in someone's life forever - means that probation needs to be about more than managing risk and providers need to commission services that are holistic. Moreover, this approach accepts that probation needs to act as a 'bridge' to mainstream services at the end of an Order and being based in a hub makes this all the more achievable (Goldhill, 2016). This means making probation less siloed, involving service users in decision making and being more innovative:

So people moved out of their little siloes to realise that actually the success of their client or their service user is born by all of us working together. (Strategic staff, site 2)

Include service users (they are the experts)- what they want and what they need and where the hub should be (CRC staff, site 4)

This approach to commissioning holds real benefits for service users. The hubs we visited were able to sustain a sense of hope by having arrangements in place that meant that service users could continue accessing the hub even after the period of probation supervision was terminated:

A lot of people volunteer while they're still linked to probation. It's obviously based on risk, what they've done. I've had someone who's been with me as a client and then started here as a volunteer. They've finished their probation order and they still stayed here as a volunteer because it opens opportunities for them then. Because when they're working here as a volunteer, it's not probation they're working for (CRC staff, site 2)

I've got a woman who was really isolated and I didn't think she was going to attend at all, but...it was lunch club that got her to attend. Her order is now finished, but she still comes and attends lunch group every Friday...then she knows if her mental health deteriorates or she's feeling lonely, she can just come back to the [hub] for some more support because she's kept in contact that way. (CRC staff, site 2)

Sites 2, 3 and 4 had volunteers who had previously been on probation. Volunteers were able to form working relationships with service users and demonstrate 'visible desistance', having created new identities based around their volunteering roles. Becoming a volunteer whilst on probation is an example of generativity (Maruna, 2001), more 'active engagement and citizenship activities, which provide a stake in the community and thus conformity' (Rocque et al., 2015)

This approach presents some important challenges to leaders in probation. In some respects, it requires probation to 'let go' of some of the control it holds over both its service users and the services it delivers. It raises questions about where responsibility lies for certain activities, but it can also symbolise a shift in terms of how service users are empowered to take control over their own desistance journeys. The foundations for this type of work are already being laid with the implementation of SEEDS2 in the NPS which seeks to engage service users in a similar vein to the original Offender Engagement Programme and SEEDS in 2008-2010 (Rex and Hosking, 2013).

Hub-based delivery forces probation providers to look beyond probation and into the community which it serves, and its service users reside. Probation should not be a 'public secret' because to function in that way serves to cocoon service users from the communities to which they are 'returning' (either symbolically or physically) and ignores the fact that people subject to probation supervision can – if given the right opportunities – be productive members of society.

This is not to ignore the importance of risk and it is here where we see the greatest challenge for probation providers. Indeed, managing the risk of people on probation in hub-based settings was highlighted as a key challenge. Probation is and must be concerned with the management of risk. Hubs however can be beneficial in terms of managing that risk - it means people can be referred into services quickly and intelligence can be shared more easily between professionals when someone is at risk of reoffending. However, the risk posed by people on probation was a common theme amongst the staff we spoke to.

there are no children here whereas we have worked out of other premises for example old churches where maybe there is a baby and toddler group running on a certain day so we've got to always make sure that each case is risk assessed and risk is dynamic...we

have to be respectful of the other partners working out of here as well. (CRC Staff, site 1)

Responsible Officer 1: I would say though that also does come with its own problems sometimes if you have a particularly volatile female or who has an alcohol problem or who is unhappy with one of us for a decision that's made... They'll come in to the [hub] where there's women who are vulnerable who aren't on a probation order and they're really angry, could be kicking off. It can be hard.

This appeared to be particularly the case in Site 3 where the women attending the hub would not be on probation but might still be classed as vulnerable. Indeed, it is important to remember that people on probation are also vulnerable and hubs present challenges in terms of managing the risk to service users as much as the risk posed by service users.

In spite of these challenges, we would argue that commissioning services with one eye on the end of an Order is critical to the implementation of 'good' desistance-focused practice in a hub setting (Goldhill, 2016).

Conclusion

In this article we have presented data that were collected through a study of six community hubs in six different CRCs. Although each hub functioned slightly differently, we have identified some clear ways in which hub-based probation can facilitate desistance (Phillips et al., 2020). Hub-based probation links people in with their communities and creates a support network which lasts beyond the end of an Order which we consider paramount in terms of supporting desistance. In this article we have focused on what we consider five key ingredients for a 'good' hub which leaders who are considering implementing such a way of working need to take into account. Moreover, we have explored why these should be considered critical in relation to McNeill et al's (2012) key principles of desistance focused practice.

There are some limitations to this research which need highlighting. Disaggregating hub-based work from 'traditional' probation delivery is difficult. We know that effective probation work relies on the relationship between the officer and the client as well as on what Dowden and Andrews (2004) call core correctional practices. Thus, while service users spoke highly of their experiences of accessing probation in a hub, it is hard to know the extent to which the relational aspect of probation practice was more important than the service being received in a hub. It is also worth remembering that we have not looked at outcomes. The quotes in this report are people's perceptions about hub-based probation practice, albeit incorporating a range of perspectives and experiences. It may be that

reoffending rates (and other intermediate outcomes) are higher or lower for people accessing hub provision; further evaluation needs to be undertaken to ascertain this. That said, there is value in delivering probation in a way in which people – both staff and service users - perceive as more positive even if it does not result in reduced reoffending. The impact that this can have in terms of enhanced legitimacy could prove invaluable should that person come into contact with probation further down the line and we uncovered some evidence that working in a hub is better for staff well-being (Phillips et al 2020). We should also note that the practice we observed in community hubs may well – and indeed most probably does – take place in ‘traditional’ probation offices. Thus, whilst we have presented hub-based work positively, this does not mean they are the silver bullet to desistance-focused practice.

That said, community hubs represent a real opportunity for probation as it progresses to its next phase. In 2021, all ‘offender management’ will be brought under the remit of the NPS. This will – by necessity – involve some decisions around what to do with the current probation estate. We would urge probation leaders to seriously consider making greater use of hubs in the new target operating model because the benefits to those subject to supervision, the staff that serve them and the communities in which they reside are manifold.

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