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HM Inspectorate
of Probation

Sport and physical activity as an intervention for reintegration and resettlement: key mechanisms for policy and practice

Dr Haydn Morgan and Professor Andrew Parker

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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr Haydn Morgan and Professor Andrew Parker, setting out six key mechanisms for the effective design and implementation of sport-based criminal justice interventions, potentially leading to longer-term transformational (rather than transactional) impacts for participants. The mechanisms highlight the benefits to be gained from adopting nuanced person-first, strengths-based approaches, and from supporting and investing in the delivery workforce. There is also a strong focus on the building of positive, supportive and trusting relationships with participants and other providers/key stakeholders, supporting the view that, at their core, probation and youth justice services are relational, collaborative and person-centred services.



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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

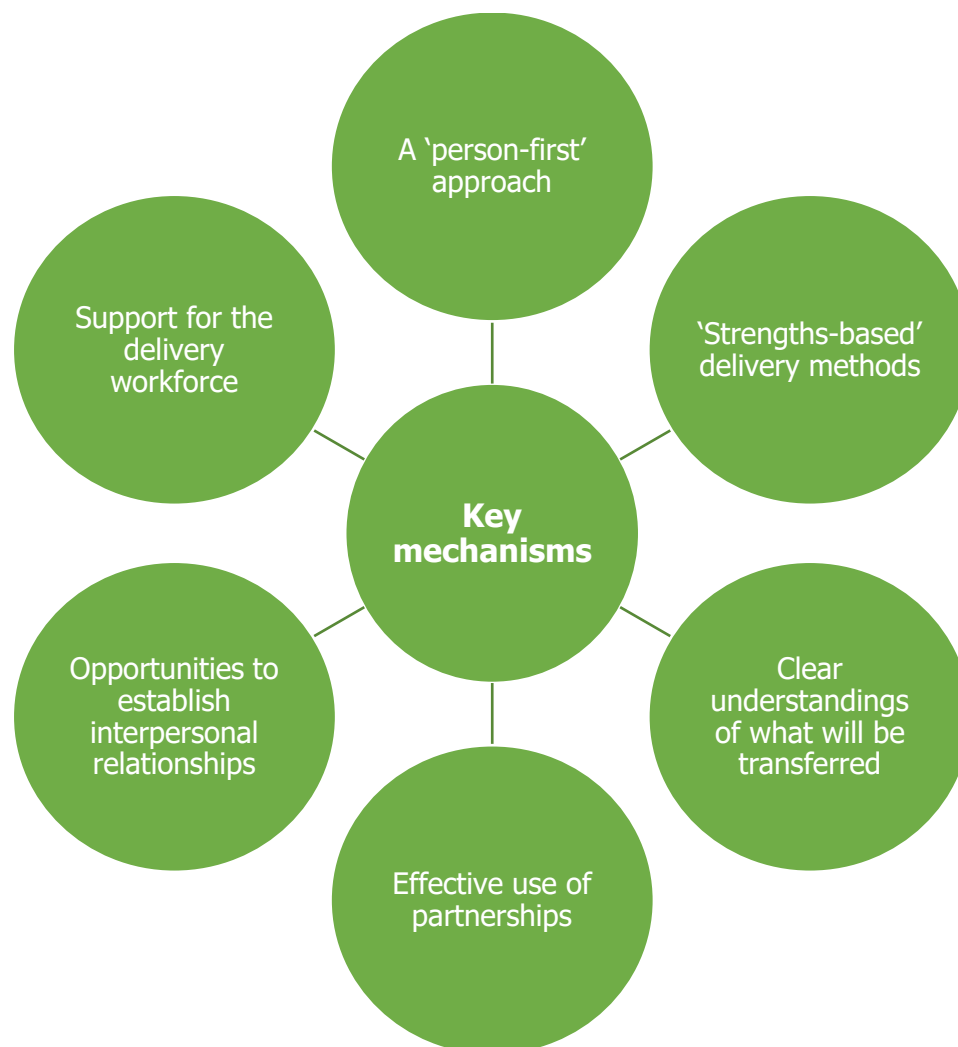
1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest at a policy level regarding the intentional use of sport and physical activity as a key component within interventions designed to support individuals who have become connected with, or are vulnerable to, engagement in the criminal justice system (Meek, 2018; Norman et al., 2024). Despite growing evidence to support the instrumental use of sport and physical activity within such interventions, both in custodial and in community settings (Morgan and Parker, 2023), there remain significant misconceptions regarding the 'power of sport' to prevent and/or divert engagement with crime or support efforts to rehabilitate and address reoffending. These misconceptions are largely based on assumptions regarding the 'life lessons' that (automatically and universally) transfer from the sport domain to other contexts. However, the evidence is clear that there are other key mechanisms in play, beyond participation, that enable sport and physical activity interventions to impact criminal justice outcomes.

The aim of this paper is to introduce some of the mechanisms that have been identified in previous research which contribute to the effective implementation of sport-based criminal justice interventions. In addition, since there has been relatively limited academic consideration of how sport and physical activity might be integrated into policy and practice around probation and resettlement, the paper offers suggestions for how these mechanisms may be integrated into efforts to support probation and youth justice services.

2. Key mechanisms in sport, physical activity, and criminal justice interventions

The evidence surrounding the integration of sport and physical activity within criminal justice interventions has identified a wide range of contributing factors that may support outcomes related to diversion, rehabilitation, and reoffending (see Norman et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2024). In this paper we concentrate on six mechanisms that are critical to ensuring that sport and physical activity interventions have a transformational (rather than transactional) impact for participants, and that should be considered within the design and implementation of such programmes in criminal justice settings (Morgan and Parker, 2023).



2.1 A 'person-first' approach

One of the problems associated with using sport and physical activity within criminal justice interventions is that very often, there is a tendency for these interventions to adopt a broad-brush approach which fails to recognise the nuanced complexities of the environment in which the intervention takes place and/or the differentiated (and often multiple) challenges and disadvantages that participants of such interventions have experienced. Moreover, the specific objectives of such interventions (e.g. diversion, rehabilitation, resettlement) are often overlooked (or assumed), which means that they lack focus and subtlety which, in

turn, reduces impact. Clearly, there is a need for sport and physical activity interventions to be cognisant of these factors and to incorporate delivery strategies that are tailored to context-specific need.

That said, it is still important to position an overarching philosophy for sport-based programmes, and to this end, we advocate for the inclusion of a 'person-first' approach. Consequently, instead of focusing such programmes on the management, mitigation, and response to any risk that programme participants may present, a 'person-first' approach views the use of such programmes as an opportunity to actively invest in the lives of (young) people who have become entangled in the criminal justice system.

Research indicates that the 'risk agenda' has the potential to stigmatise marginalised and vulnerable young people (Kelly, 2012) and can restrict efforts to rehabilitate or reintegrate those deprived of their liberty (Case, 2021). Therefore, attention should orient towards sport and physical activity interventions that explore and adopt strategies for 'investment' into these individuals. Such an approach has the potential to ensure that interventions are more specifically tailored towards the aspirations of participants whilst at the same time treating them as an 'individual first' and 'offender second' (Case, 2021), thus providing a foundation for reintegration and resettlement.

2.2 'Strengths-based' delivery methods

Typically, in sport-based interventions focussed on diversion or rehabilitation, the delivery methods that are employed are grounded in a 'deficit' perspective, where the intervention is designed to address an individual's 'deficiencies' and/or 'problems' or steer them away from risks associated with negative outcomes (Farrington and Welsh, 2009). However, critics note that a deficit perspective can serve to reinforce negatively construed assumptions about particular individuals or groups (not least those engaged with the criminal justice system), and further supports a perspective that it is the (in)action of these individuals in taking personal responsibility to address their deficits that is the root cause of their problems (Paraschak and Thompson, 2014). A further criticism of the 'deficit approach' is that it assumes that only the actions of external 'experts' can resolve these problems (Saleebey, 2013), which results in the beneficiaries of interventions becoming disempowered and dependent on 'expert' support for their rehabilitation and personal development (Garven et al., 2016).

In contrast, implementing sport-based interventions to accentuate and build upon the particular 'strengths' that an individual possesses (Case, 2021) has been shown to be more effective in enabling positive outcomes, as this approach accentuates the lived experience, vision, values, and hopes of programme participants as the stimulus for intervention (Saleebey, 2013). Findings from across the youth estate (see for example, Hapeta et al. (2023) and Norman and Smith (2023)) examine how a strengths-based perspective reframes problems, rather than denies that they exist and converges attention on individual strengths and available resources to unlock a young person's potential to reintegrate into society more positively, support desistance, and enable sustainable transitions into adulthood.

Paraschak and Thompson (2014) argue that the implementation of a strengths-based approach within sport-based interventions can be based on three guiding principles:

- (i) individuals, irrespective of their current circumstances, have acquired and demonstrated strengths
- (ii) individuals possess resources in their community that can be identified and drawn upon to enhance their strengths

- (iii) those who assist and support these individuals do so from the perspective that they intend to work with them (not 'on' them) to further develop their strengths.

Hence, sport-based interventions within reintegration and resettlement strategies need to be designed to suit the requirements and personal characteristics of participants, which may include 'through-the-gate' support via established links with potential employers and community groups which align with participant strengths and interests (Murray et al., 2024).

2.3 Clear understanding of what will be transferred from the intervention

In keeping with notions of promoting a transformational effect on reintegration and resettlement, understanding more explicitly how any skills, attributes, and competencies acquired and developed through sport-based interventions transfer to other contexts is essential. Indeed, the transference of attributes from sport-based interventions to support rehabilitation and resettlement is an inherent objective of many such interventions and is often a claim that practitioners make (anecdotally) when reporting impacts (Jacobs and Wright, 2018). Yet, research rarely evidences what skills and attributes are transferred or how transference occurs (Morgan and Parker, 2023).

A further challenge is that transfer is not an automatic condition of sport-based interventions (Ekholm, 2013), and that any transfer may be delayed, non-linear, partial, or gradual, which means that measuring the extent to which a sport-based intervention is the stimulus for any transference is difficult to determine (Morgan and Parker, 2023). Moreover, from a practical viewpoint, there is a tendency to merely 'bolt on' opportunities to acquire skills and attributes which may support reintegration objectives (e.g. through recognised training and qualifications) and which appear to present a foundation for transference, but, in reality, merely 'tick a box' to underpin a transactional approach to resettlement (Morgan, forthcoming).

Identifying what skills and attributes may better support resettlement is central to determining the effectiveness of transference from sport-based interventions which focus on criminal justice outcomes. However, as noted above, the skills, qualities and attributes required for rehabilitation or diversion may vary markedly from those required to support reintegration, meaning that transference needs to be specific to the overall aim of the intervention. Therefore, rather than focusing on the narrow outcome of developing certain skills, sport-based interventions may be better served to broaden their focus and to consider how they may enable the acquisition of certain forms of capital (see [Academic Insights paper 2022/10](#) by Kemshall and McCartan). Research indicates that sport-based interventions hold the potential to develop a broad range of capitals (see Morgan et al., 2020) such as:

- human capital, i.e. knowledge, skills, and work experience (Murray et al., 2024)
- social capital, i.e. broadening relational networks and connections which may enable pathways into education, training, and/or employment (Morgan et al., 2020)
- psychological capital, i.e. increasing qualities such as hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Morgan, 2018).

However, in considering transferability from sport-based interventions to other 'life spheres', one cannot assume that an individual's preferred or desired life outcomes are solely financially motivated. A stronger appreciation of individual aspirations and hopes (Morgan et al., 2021), along with capturing articulations of possible or future selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986), should be at the heart of the design of sport-based interventions to ensure that transfer is more transformational and sustainable for reintegration and resettlement (Morgan and Parker, 2023).

2.4 Effective use of partnerships

Research also indicates that efforts to support people directly or indirectly engaged in the criminal justice system through sport and physical activity often hinge on collaboration between a range of related organisations and individuals (Morgan and Baker, 2021; Morgan et al., 2023). The benefits of partnership working are well-rehearsed, where the potential to pool physical and financial resources, and draw together a breadth of specialist skills and expertise towards a common objective, may facilitate action and impact far outweighing that which a single agency could provide in isolation (Morgan and Parker, 2023). Furthermore, partnerships often enable criminal justice interventions to be more ambitious in their intent. However, the complexity and individualised trajectory of routes into and through the criminal justice system requires organisations involved within partnership arrangements to demonstrate sufficient agility to respond as need arises and offer their expertise, resources, and support at different points of each individual journey. Indeed, the ability to transfer the individual safely, securely, and positively between different organisations and agencies requires great skill, drawing upon lived and learned experience alike, especially within the context of 'through the gate' transitions into probation and youth justice services.

However, as Morgan and Baker (2021) observe, partnerships within criminal justice are all too frequently infused with the characteristics of a 'rational goal' mode of governance, where partnerships operate more 'strategically' to deploy resources and expertise efficiently to achieve short-term objectives. Again, these strategic partnerships are indicative of a transactional approach to intervention, where an instrumental, top-down approach to partnership working may enable short-term impact to be made but the longer-term transformative power to enable sustained change for individuals engaged in the criminal justice system may be limited. In addition, a strategic approach to partnership working often promotes managerial authority by the more powerful actors in the partnership to be maintained through an incentivised focus on attaining pre-determined goals and targets.

In contrast, communicative partnership arrangements, which are exemplified by a self-governance approach and the decentralisation of power (McDonald, 2005), presents a more promising vantage point from which to establish partnerships in the sport and criminal justice sphere. With an emphasis on capacity building, a self-governance approach enables more sustainable solutions to emerge, which address concerns pertinent to the partnership rather than those imposed from elsewhere (McDonald, 2005). In addition, communicative partnerships provide the necessary flexibility to address the complex and varied challenges thrown up by criminal justice environments using the principles of co-design and co-production to develop solutions that are based upon and informed by the expertise and experience of all partners, rather than just the preferences and imperatives of the more powerful (McDonald, 2005).

Given the centrality of partnership arrangements within sport and physical activity interventions, the principles of communicative partnership may offer an important conceptual framework to guide policy and practice of partnership working within probation, youth justice, and resettlement approaches.

2.5 Opportunities to establish interpersonal relationships

The interpersonal relationships between the recipients of sport-based interventions and those who lead and deliver them has been widely observed as the most critical mechanism to achieve positive developmental outcomes in sport and criminal justice approaches (Morgan and Parker, 2017; Morgan et al., 2021; Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013). Indeed, research highlights the vital function that effective interpersonal relationships perform in encouraging sustained engagement with sport-based interventions, whilst providing a platform, built on

trust and mutual respect, upon which broader developmental activity is based (see Morgan and Parker, 2023; Norman et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, the tenets of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996) have been frequently proposed as a philosophical basis to examine how effective relationships may be constructed between the recipients of sport-based interventions and those who deliver them. While space does not permit a detailed unpacking of critical pedagogy, the importance of relationships is central to this approach, where the pedagogical connection between recipient and delivery personnel is horizontal (rather than hierarchical) in nature and constructed to emphasise dialogue which attunes to the themes and conditions that are evident in the lives of participants (Morgan and Parker, 2022; Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013). These horizontal relationships serve as a foundation for the co-creation of knowledge between recipient and delivery personnel, and act as a bridge for recipients to convey their viewpoints and life-perspectives, all of which supports the development of a more critical understanding of the world, and the basis to reflect upon how they may need to personally adapt to connect more legitimately and constructively with society.

This kind of approach coheres appositely with notions of mentoring, which for many vulnerable individuals can provide a critical means of support (see [Academic Insights paper 2021/04](#) by Buck). Research on mentoring relationships has consistently reported their value in supporting youth populations that have become engaged in the criminal justice system (Duron et al., 2020) and those transitioning out of the care system (Gowdy and Hogan, 2021). Yet for many engaged in the criminal justice system, the presence of a reliable, caring mentor to provide a positive stable relationship is often lacking (Duron et al., 2020). Therefore, supporting probation and resettlement through the allocation of mentors may have merit, especially where the mentor is somebody who is self-nominated (i.e. selected by the mentee) and can offer reliable, authentic, consistent, and longitudinal support.

Central to the practice of effective mentoring support is the potential to raise mentees' awareness of choice, responsibility, and personal commitment to individual improvement (Duron et al., 2020), which aligns cogently with the philosophy of the strengths-based approach outlined above. In addition, mentors should have an awareness of trauma-aware/informed pedagogy, in order to support individuals with significant adverse childhood experiences or exposure to trauma (Meek, 2018; Parker and Larkin, 2023). Notably, this has become an increasingly prominent aspect of sport-based interventions that are concerned with criminal justice outcomes.

2.6 Support for the delivery workforce

Clearly, if interpersonal relationships are critical to the success of sport-based interventions in the criminal justice system, then supporting the workforce who design and deliver such programmes is equally important. Studies have documented how staff, whether based within the secure estate or in the community, are highly dedicated and motivated by a desire to help others or 'give back' to society (Meek, 2018; Morgan et al., 2021). Very often, staff in the sector have themselves overcome personal hardship or trauma (Morgan and Baker, 2021), which provides the lived experience for becoming an effective practitioner. However, working in the sport and criminal justice sector is precarious, with work often poorly or under paid, limited to short-term contracts, and/or offering inadequate career progression opportunities, all of which impacts negatively on workforce sustainability.

In addition, employing sport-based interventions to actively reduce crime is complex and requires staff who are equipped to provide a high level of skill and a consistent offer that young people can depend on. This demands that staff possess a requisite level of skill and understanding to address multiple issues and prevent further harm to (young) people and their communities. Therefore, investment into the workforce is essential to not only sustain

employment but also to ensure that training, supervision, and career progression is a priority (Morgan and Parker, 2023). However, building these skills and retaining highly skilled staff is an ongoing challenge for the sector, which has been subject to significant financial cuts and short-term funding models.

3. Conclusion

In this paper we have examined how sport and physical activity can be intentionally utilised as a key component within interventions designed to support criminal justice outcomes. While there is a growing evidence-base to support the inclusion of sport and physical activity within criminal justice interventions, there remain gaps in knowledge pertaining to their specific role in enabling personal and social change, and the extent to which any transformative impacts are attributable to wider mechanisms incorporated within such interventions. As we have summarised, perceptions surrounding the 'power of sport' to act as a 'silver bullet' or 'panacea' to address criminal justice outcomes are wide of the mark. Thus, while sport and physical activity can present an effective means to 'hook' individuals into such interventions, it is the mechanisms outlined in the paper that may enable sport and physical activity to act as a foundation for intervention.

Importantly, we contend that:

- a long-term perspective on individual transformation (rather than meeting short-term criminal justice targets) is required
- sustainable approaches to rehabilitation, reintegration and resettlement are critical.

To this end, adopting a person-first, strengths-based approach to the design of sport and physical activity interventions is essential. Moreover, much of the academic literature concerning how sport and physical activity interventions might be utilised to address criminal justice outcomes is focused on diversionary activity within the community or as a rehabilitative tool within the secure estate, with limited attention placed on how sport and physical activity might be incorporated within wider probation, youth justice, and resettlement policy and practice. Given that the aims of these differing areas and services may differ, this is an important oversight and a potential avenue for future research to explore.

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