Local futures for Probation: Research, policy & practice in Wales

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Conference Report

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Prifysgol Abertawe

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Acknowledgments:

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the symposium - in-person, online and to this report. Thank you especially to Professor Peter Raynor whose significant contribution to evidenced-based probation practice inspired this event, as well as the ongoing research and practice of many in the field. We congratulate him on his retirement after 50 years at Swansea University.

Introduction

Introduction to Local futures for Probation: Research, policy & practice in Wales

Ella Rabaiotti, Swansea University and Convenor of Wales Probation Development Group

This report brings together key contributions from - Local Futures for Probation: Research, Practice, and Policy in Wales – a symposium hosted by the Research Institute for Policy and Practice, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Swansea University on Friday 6 March 2026.

An idea for an event to mark Professor Peter Raynor's retirement after 50 years at Swansea University led to a much larger occasion, bringing together in person and online a wide range of academics, policymakers, probation practitioners and students to explore evidence based working and effective local probation practice in Wales.

The symposium was held during yet another critical time for probation in England and Wales. After the reunification of probation following failed part-privatisation of the service, probation has been rebuilding, recruiting and refocussing. Responses to the prison crisis, through the Independent Sentencing Review (the 'Gauke review') and the Sentencing Act 2026 are leading to further significant changes and a renewed emphasis on probation and community sentences. An important time then to reflect on research and practice and opportunities to influence change, locally and nationally in Wales and the UK.

Many at the symposium have been interested in the opportunities to improve justice in Wales – both criminal and social justice - that could be afforded by the devolution of probation. We've examined the findings of the Thomas Commission, and ambitions set out by the Welsh Government, as well as the thinking from Wales Probation Development Group (WPDG) and work by Welsh Centre for Public Policy on progressing this matter. This event was not about reviewing those arguments but moving forward through research and practice focused debates. Looking at how probation can work more effectively and locally, and how those things interact, in particular by drawing on evidence. It may be that to reach these ambitions a devolved probation will be needed.

In an opening address, and leading the tributes to Peter, we heard from Rt Hon Mark Drakeford MS. Mark, former First Minister for Wales, is a former probation officer and youth justice worker, and taught previously at Swansea University where he also completed his PhD, supervised by Professor Peter Raynor. It was therefore fitting for Mark to reflect on Peter's significant contributions to academia, policy and practice. Mark highlighted Peter's emphasis to his students on the "doing of things rather than

simply the writing of things", and whether your work was "useful for the people you were writing about". Mark reflected on Peter's research which has shown change is possible for people in the Criminal Justice System and probation officers can help make positive improvements in people's lives. This is assisted by a 'golden thread of humanity', policy informed by evidence, and decisions being made closer to the local people they affect. Mark concluded by reading a letter from the Confederation of European Probation which highlighted that Peter's research and outstanding contributions will leave a lasting legacy in probation.

We were delighted to receive a keynote address from Peter, of which an edited version follows in this report, reflecting on 50 years of probation research – including much he has been involved in personally from the 1980s. Notably, Peter highlighted his research with Prof. Maurice Vanstone and Prof. Pamela Ugwudike in Jersey on individual supervision skills and its far reaching impact. Bringing us up to date, he provided critical reflections on the implementation gap between what we know from research and what we do in practice. To address this Peter emphasised the importance of culture of learning, trusted management and professional curiosity. He concluded with ten evidenced-based strategies to revive probation, including 'working locally', 'renewing probation's decarceration mission' and 'evaluating everything'.

Peter's address was followed by lightning talks on ways of working within probation; from innovative practice approaches described by Prof. Jason Davies and Dr Gemma Morgan, to community hub models, including the 'Grand Avenues' scheme, shared by Prof. Mike Maguire and Prof. Kate Williams, as well as my own research on inclusive approaches. Vivian Geiran shared the Irish experience, emphasising 'locally grounded', 'professionally confident', 'socially informed' and 'future-facing' probation work.

The afternoon panel consisted of representatives from Napo Cymru and Safer Wales, and chaired by Brian Heath MBE, ensured voices from the field were heard in setting further priorities for research, policy and practice in Wales. The symposium provided many points for reflection, concluding here with two:

Firstly, *locally based approaches present promising 'avenues' for probation reform in Wales.* Through integrated innovative (and evaluated) practices, and meaningful community partnerships, Wales has the potential to create a more responsive, humane, and effective probation system that supports desistance through stronger relationships.

Secondly, *involvement of researchers and practitioners within policy and organisational change remains critical.* Peter shared half a decade of probation research and learning that remains relevant today. Given the change practitioners (including both those in probation and voluntary sector) have already experienced, they need to be onboard and central to future developments.

Keynote address

After 50 years of research on probation services – where are we now?

Professor Peter Raynor – Emeritus Professor, Swansea University

I picked 50 years not just because I've been in this university for 50 years, but because this half century has been a very interesting time in probation research and probation has been through several big changes in that time. I will try and explain this through this presentation.

Probation in the 1970s

I joined the probation service as a trainee in 1970, so that is more than 50 years. And what was it like being a probation officer in the 1970s? Think of a probation service without computers, mobile phones, or even photocopiers. We were allocated a patch or a community where people lived. You would supervise people who got put on probation in that area, and you would write reports for the Court for the people who got into trouble in that area. Reports were written by qualified, experienced probation officers. And then you would pick up, under supervision, the same people that you'd be writing reports about. If later in their careers they went to prison, you would probably do the aftercare as well, and you would visit them in prison. We used to do home visits. If somebody didn't turn up for their appointment, we didn't immediately breach or get them recalled to prison, we tried to find out what had gone wrong, and that usually meant, visiting where they were supposed to be living, and seeing what the trouble was, and if it was a situation that could be retrieved.

We were largely autonomous and responsible for our own work. A Home Office inspector came and looked at our work and said we were fit to carry on. Practice was very variable indeed, in terms of quality, because everybody was doing their own thing, but the best practice was pretty good. We were locally based; we were locally managed. We worked for a probation committee, which was made up of magistrates from the county, and one or two others. I was a co-opted member of West Glamorgan Probation Committee for about 10 years, which was interesting.

We qualified as social workers as we completed our training as probation officers. We were seen often as part of the elite of social work. That was the kind of reputation we had. Us and the psychiatric social workers, we were the people who were believed to be able to deal with difficult people.

Very limited bureaucracy in those days. I did my all my administration, in one afternoon a week. Supervision was available as we wanted, in terms of case discussions and so on. For formal accountability, once a month, I had to present my

statistics to my senior probation officer. And that was management. And those of you who work in current probation services will find this quite amazing. Of course, part of the reason was there were no computers in those days, so it wasn't possible to have all the boxes to tick that you have now.

Supervision was mostly of people who had consented to be supervised, because when a probation order was made in court, the defendant was asked if they agreed to the order. And sometimes they didn't. Mostly they did. And this provided a kind of contract and agreement that you could then work on in the supervision process, which was something very useful.

Home visits, absolutely routine. We wouldn't do a report for the court without having visited the defendant's home. And people we had under supervision, we would regularly be visiting them at home. Not all the contacts took place in the office, which gives a sense of how things have changed.

In 1974, we were told that ‘nothing worked’. Robert Martinson, the American criminologist, published his famous article in *The Public Interest*. This is what he wrote – “with few isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effects on recidivism”. Now, he wasn't quite correct, and the research project he was reporting on, did have a number of exceptions, but his article made a big impact politically, and on thinking about probation around the English-speaking world.

In the UK, we had the IMPACT study, Intensive Matched Probation and Aftercare Treatment. This study compared the effects of low caseloads with the effects of high caseloads. Did people do better if they were supervised by probation officers that had much lower caseloads? Because probation officers thought they would. This is one of the reasons the study was done by the Home Office. And it didn't work out like that. The people supervised on the low caseloads actually did slightly worse. What probation officers did was not necessarily all effective. Some of it was helpful, some of it was not helpful, and there wasn't, in this study, any attempt to control what the practice was.

What did the Home Office make of the research results? John Croft was the Head of Home Office Research (1978), and he told us penal treatments do not have any reformative effect. The problem is, we've put a lot of money into developing the agencies to deal with these people. Are we going to simply scrap them? Or are they going to respond to this challenge by developing new approaches and new methods? And that was more or less what happened, the new approaches and new methods.

The next twenty years: probation development from 1980s to late 1990s and beyond

I tend to look at the development of probation since then as going through three… by now, four phases. From the 1980s to 1993, the main task was understood as providing alternatives to custody and reducing the need for custodial sentencing,

because officialdom had become convinced that we couldn't change people, but what we could change was what we did about people, the decisions that were made about them in the system. So we influenced the decisions. And this went on quite well, particularly with younger offenders, through to the 1990s. It came to a sudden halt in 1993, at the Conservative Party conference that autumn, where Michael Howard said that ‘prison works’. And that was really the end of alternatives to custody, and probation managers were discouraged from talking about alternatives to custody from that point onwards.

What do you do then? Well, luckily in some other countries, Canada and the United States particularly, there had not been the same investment in nothing works doctrine. A number of researchers, mainly psychologists, were looking for things that did work. They knew not everything worked; they knew that to try and document and identify what did work. So, we had the ‘what works’ period. What works has got some unfortunate connotations because of the way it was used by Tony Blair and the new Labour government to justify privatisations. But originally, it's a phrase that they were using in Canada and America to talk about the selection of methods and approaches which made people less likely to offend. And from the late 1990s to mid-2010s, a lot of effort went into the development of ways of working with offenders, which did make them less likely to offend. So you can see the shift there, from reducing imprisonment, to trying to reduce offending. And the belief that was possible returned in the 1990s after being largely abandoned in the 1970s.

During the 1990s and 2000s, a lot of the work went into development of group programmes based on cognitive behavioural principles to try and influence thinking and behaviour. And then we had a period when politicians wanted to use probation to send messages about how tough they were. And we had the extraordinary privatization experiment driven entirely by ideology. It failed badly and was followed by a centralisation of management in the Ministry of Justice, which we now have. And there are certain aspects of that, which are not totally favourable. If you put a small service like probation alongside a big service like prisons, and then run them together, then who is going to be the poor relation in terms of attention and so on? Probation became rather like an annex to the prison system for a while.

Peter’s research agenda

What was I doing all this time? One of the reasons I came into university work was that when I was a probation officer, I used to worry quite a lot about do we actually know which of these things is doing any good? I felt I could usefully spend some time and effort looking at - What are the things that do work? Rather the same as some of the Canadians were trying to do over in Canada at the time.

In the 1980s, I did some early research on victim support, followed by work on youth justice, which was about diversion and about reducing the need for custody. I did some work about drugs. And I did a study of probation as an alternative to custody

based on a group project which ran down the road in Port Talbot. It was known as the Afan Alternative.

In the 1990s, I worked with the Institute of Criminology in Cambridge on pre-sentence reports. We analysed a lot of reports and interviewed judges to get their view about reports that had been presented in cases in their court, because we thought the consumer response would be important. Some judges said, I've never seen this report before, but others did remember, and said this was the bit that was useful, this was the bit that wasn't, and so on.

I was also involved with Professor Maurice Vanstone in research on the first cognitive behavioural group programme in British Probation, which was the STOP programme, Straight Thinking on Probation, in Mid-Glamorgan. I told the chief officer there, it'll never work. I did carry on and do the research to find out if it did or not, and actually it did achieve quite a lot. And that was also when I became involved in piloting Risk Need Assessment in various parts of the UK, and in the Channel Islands. And that led to a lot more work, in a later decade.

In the 2000s, I was involved with Professor Mike Maguire in resettlement pathfinders following on from work we'd done on automatic conditional release and voluntary aftercare. I had a look at ethnic differences in the experience of probation with Dr. Sam Lewis. I did some work on Youth Justice drugs projects, which didn't work terribly well. And I started on a programme of evaluation research in Jersey. They have a way of dealing with offenders, outside the criminal justice system called parish hall inquiries, which have been going on for hundreds of years. And had never been studied until, I and Dr. Helen Miles in Jersey had a look at them. They're far too complicated to explain today, but they worked quite well.

I was interested in what was working. If we go back to the Afan alternative project. The group members reoffended 50% in over 2 years. Similar people who went into custodial sentences reoffended at 63%. And you'll recognise this as a result all over the place. People who receive custodial sentences tend to do worse than similar people who are dealt with non-custodially. Even more surprising, when we looked at pre-sentence reports, we found that better written and more thorough reports got better results. We developed an appraisal system for reports, which went on to be used by the inspectorate and various people for about 20 years.

Straight Thinking on Probation, the first cognitive behavioural programme, was towards the beginning of the What Works initiatives in probation. Programme completers were re-convicting 35% in one year. Similar people released from custody, 48%. And the programme completers, we were able to find out that they have become less impulsive, and victim aware.

2010's – research into the impact of individual supervision skills

Later on, we got to evaluating the impact of individual supervision. And it seems to me to be very important to find out how well this worked. If people did it well, did it

lead to better results? When we talk about supervision skills, Canadians talk about core correctional practices, but they mean the same thing. The probation service in Jersey was happy to get involved in this research, when really it would have been very difficult to ask any other probation service in the UK to do it, because people were too anxious about what was happening to probation to take the risk of engaging in this kind of research, except in Jersey.

And Maurice Vanstone who was in Swansea University and retired a year or two ago, and Pamela Ugwudike, now in Southampton, were the co-researchers on this project. Along with Dr. Helen Miles, who was then working with probation in Jersey. The Jersey Supervision Skills Study, some people call it JS3; 95 interviews were analysed, and 14 staff. We were interested in the skills they were using and the impacts on reoffending. When we compared the people supervised by staff who were assessed as using below-average levels of skill, and people supervised by staff who were above average on the skills rating, the difference was quite large. 58% reconviction within 2 years for the people supervised by the less skilled staff, 26% for the people supervised by the more skilled staff. As always, in this kind of study, you'll get a result and you start picking it apart to see what you've done wrong. But actually, it wasn't wrong. If you looked at the levels of risk, for example, it's not the case that is the more skilled staff were supervising less risky offenders, they were as risky as the others, you know, there was a risk of a constant across the study.

The difference was what the officers were doing. This is important and reassuring and shows that probation supervision makes a difference if it's done right. When we finished the data gathering, I thought the officers would be very relieved by the fact they weren't doing it anymore, the opposite happened. I got a phone call saying would I like to go over to Jersey and train them to use the research instruments that we've used in the study, so that they could use them on each other?

And so, to help them do this, Maurice and I, mainly Maurice, did most of the drafting on this, we produced a manual for how to use our research instruments, which we made open access, so that anybody can get on with it. The French translated it and sent it to every probation officer in France. What use they made of it, I'm not quite sure, but it went all over the place. There's a Finnish version, which I can't understand a single word, but they did some work with it in Helsinki, and then I went over to Helsinki to do some training. And it's been used in Belgium and Catalonia and other places as well. And because we made it open access, we don't know exactly who's been using it for what, but we know about some of them.

What international research tells us on reducing reoffending and why don't we do this

So, what do we know from these 50 years of trying to find out what is working, what actually makes a difference? We know that we can reduce custodial sentencing through effective communication for sentencers. We know we can provide community sentences that reduce reoffending. We know we can promote pro-social

thinking and behaviour through group programmes, and particularly through individual supervision, if we do that in the right way. We know that the skills used by probation staff in supervision can be improved through training. And some people are very good anyway, some people are very poor anyway, but most people are somewhere in the middle. And they move up the scale with appropriate training. We know, 'Risk, Need, and Responsivity', as a framework for assessment and decision making, does allow good decisions to be made, and we know how to do it.

The big problem to me at the moment is… Why are we not consistently doing these things in England and Wales? Partly, of course, is politics, that politicians have different ideas about what probation should look like. But mainly, it's the state that the probation service has been left in by the reorganisations that it's gone through. Staff are overloaded, and the average level of experience isn't really high enough to be able to transmit public practice in the appropriate learning culture from the more experienced people and less experienced. Involvement with sentencers is quite limited. Probation used to be owned by sentencers. Now, sentencers have a much poorer understanding of community sentences, and they make much less use of them, about half as much as they used to. That means that more of the caseload of probation becomes post-custodial instead of community sentences.

There are concerns about over-centralised and top-down management. If people in the Ministry of Justice have a good idea, they tend to implement it in a way which makes it very difficult for probation staff to see it as a good idea, because it turns into a set of instructions. Instead of ideas which can be communicated to people, so that they buy into them and learn to believe in them. Those of you who are working in probation at the moment will understand what I mean by the box ticking of those on supervision, and far too many things to be completed on a computer instead of spending time talking to the people you're supervising. That, that may be moving with some of the new technology that's around, and AI may help with that.

One of the things I looked at, in Jersey was, compliance. How do you avoid breaching too many probationers and, they had a system there where they invite people in to discuss why they weren't reporting and see if there's something that could be a done to help. I think it worked rather well. And when a third of people released from prison under supervision are being sent back, and most of those who are being sent back are because they didn't report to a probation officer, then I think this is a bit more trigger-happy than is helpful. It sounds as if that's going to change under the new Sentencing Act, because there's going to be much less post-custodial supervision.

The implementation gap

Why is this happening? It's becoming clear internationally in probation - and a lot of other people have been doing the same kind of research that I've been doing around Europe and around Canada and the United States - that there is typically an implementation gap between what we know and what we do. And some of the

reasons for this gap are to do with the culture of organisations and the way people absorb and process new knowledge. Some of my American colleagues are beginning to talk about implementation science and developing a body of work around that.

What are we learning from implementation science? You need adequate resources. You need trusted management. And that means management that you can communicate with and has the same knowledge and commitments that you have yourself. In probation, it tends to mean managers who have themselves done the work of probation officers, which used to be always the case, but has not always been the case since reorganisation and centralisation in Ministry of Justice.

Experienced colleagues are important to translate the culture of the organisation. And the culture of the organisation has to be a learning culture, something Maurice and I used to describe as a culture of curiosity. We need professionalism. We need locally developed strategies, working with local agencies and local sentencers. We need better communication with them. Of course, we need to evaluate everything, that's what you would expect a researcher to say, but it actually does pay off, because we wouldn't know what was working if we didn't study it. Not too many reorganisations. Managers like to reorganise, because they like to make an impact that way. And you end up with staff who are still struggling to come to terms with the last reorganisation when the next one comes along.

I wrote, not long ago, a piece about ‘Reviving Probation’, and that really mentions the same strategies. All of these are to an extent evidence-driven, they're not always driven by high levels of certainty, but they're driven by suggestive evidence in some cases, and these are the 10 things I thought could realistically be done:

1. **Developing practice skills for supervisors**
2. **Sensible caseloads**
3. **Good supervision:** Supervision by senior staff who actually know the trade themselves and have time to listen to it.
4. **Reset post-prison supervision for short sentences,** that, I think, is an argument we might have won, because it looks like it's going to disappear.
5. **Working locally**
6. **Re-engaging with sentencers**
7. **Renewing the decarceration mission:** a government policy about reducing imprisonment which can then be articulated as a mission for the probation service, so the probation service can be seen to work with government. When I was a probation officer when I started, we had 35,000 people in prison. And we thought, this is far too many, and now we're well on the way to 100,000. And so there has to be room for decarceration.
8. **Having probation managed by probation people**: separate from civil service and prisons. Some of the people who are managing it now are quite good, but I don't think civil service has been a helpful home for a probation

service. Evidence suggests it worked better when it was locally run than it was run by local trusts or local boards who are better able to engage locally.

9. **Embrace technology**: I won't talk about technology, except that there are some good things coming in the technology, it's not really bad.
10. **Evaluate everything**

If you look at the first ever Probation Officer's Handbook, which was published in 1935, you will find there's a discussion there about should probation be nationally organised, so that probation officers are part of the civil service, or should it be locally organised? And this was settled for a long time because in 1922 the departmental committee decided probation officers should be appointed by the courts and paid by the local authorities. Why? Because a national service centralised in central government appears to overlook important principles inherent in the probation system. There must be the closest cooperation on the one hand between the court and the probation officer - and on the other hand, between the probation officer and the social agencies in the district where he or she is working. But other than that, this seems to me to be exactly the case that we have been trying to make in the Wales Probation Development Group about trying to bring the management and the policy information close to the people you need to work with, and the people for whom you are delivering. They already knew all this back in 1935. It's a pity that they have forgotten some of it. It's time to remember it again.

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Lightning Talks

Locally Based Probation: Exploring New Approaches for Wales

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Introduction

This paper brings together insights from a presentation exploring innovative, locally rooted approaches to probation in Wales. It focuses on research into two emerging policy and practice areas - Inclusion Health and Warm Hubs - and suggests they could be situated within broader ambitions for a devolved and community-integrated probation model. These approaches respond to key barriers faced by people on probation to achieving desistance, including poor health and wellbeing, limited social and community connections, restricted access to services, and a lack of social capital.

Context: A vision for devolved, community-centred probation

The Wales Probation Development Group, part of the Welsh Centre for Crime and Social Justice, has developed a series of evidenced-based papers that propose a model for probation in Wales that aligns more closely with devolved systems and Welsh social policy. The latest ideas from the group have been consolidated into a set of key ingredients for effective probation which:

- Re-professionalise an essential criminal justice service
- Contribute to and implement Welsh Government's social policy and criminal and social justice objectives
- Impact the prisons crisis and adult reoffending rates through evidence-based working
- Emphasise locally managed, commissioned and delivered services which work in partnership at the Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) level
- Re-emphasise rehabilitation, desistance and the importance of relationships as guiding professional objectives for probation staff
- Re-establish close relationships with local Courts, families and communities
- Ensure the voices of victims of crimes are heard at every opportunity with an emphasis on expanding Restorative Justice services and problem-solving Courts

- Foster the engagement of local voluntary sector organisations in providing practical rehabilitative services

What is common about these ambitions is the closer involvement of community into probation and the lives of people on probation and the strengthening of local relationships. Current approaches to working with people on probation are primarily driven centrally rather than developed locally using the expertise of local staff working with local partners and Welsh communities as well as the people on probation themselves. In contrast, examples, such as the 'Grand Avenue scheme' (discussed in a separate paper in this report by Maguire, Thomas and Williams), show that locally driven initiatives can stimulate new thinking in probation practice. Two further examples worthy of further consideration include 'inclusion health' collaboration and the potential for 'warm hubs' for people on probation.

Example one: Inclusion health collaborative approaches

Inclusion health approaches help to mitigate the severe health inequalities experienced by socially excluded groups. For people on probation, who often experience co-occurring needs such as mental ill-health, chronic physical health conditions and substance use, traditional health systems can be disjointed, inaccessible or stigmatising (Rabaiotti, 2024a). Local collaborations between probation, Public Health Wales (PHW) and health boards, such as those in Swansea and Cardiff, have begun implementing:

- Health needs assessments for people on probation within PDUs
- Outreach and in-reach models, including emerging probation health clinics
- Enhanced screening and treatment, including for bloodborne viruses

These efforts begin to demonstrate how local service adaptation can meet complex needs more effectively than standard models. Qualitative research in 2024 by Rabaiotti and Morgan (*forthcoming*) in a South Wales PDU explored the physical health experiences of men on probation and professionals supporting them.

Barriers identified by men on probation included:

- Lack of continuity and coordination of care
- Mistrust of professionals and systems
- Inflexible appointment systems
- Digital exclusion affecting access to health information and services

Opportunities highlighted by the men on probation included:

- Drop-in centres offering multi-needs support and informal contact
- Peer support and outreach
- Specialist support workers and health advocates

Professionals (including probation officers, GPs and nurses, and substance misuse workers) recognised the challenges presented by health exclusion, including fragmented systems (especially in relation to continuity of care, joint working and information sharing) which are unable to respond holistically to complex co-occurring needs, and instead reinforces exclusion through stigma. Positively, there are emerging inclusion practices, including localised innovation, advocacy, and creative problem-solving.

The men in our study highlighted the opportunity for a drop in community hub that could support their health and wellbeing but also wider determinants of health (and drivers of offending) such as employment, housing, and finance support. As well as opportunities to develop skills, social network and links to other services. This aligns with inclusion health principles around integrated and accessible services (NHS England, 2023). While probation-specific hubs, such as Grand Avenues, may be a longer-term ambition, Wales already has an extensive network of Warm Hubs capable of supporting inclusion health populations, such as people on probation.

Example two: The development of Warm Hubs

Developed at a grass roots level since 2022, and benefitting from Welsh Government funding, 'warm hubs' all across Wales offer warm hospitality during a cost-of-living crisis. However, research indicates that they offer much more than a hot drink and place to keep warm; they have become important social, emotional, and community resources. A 2023 study in one Welsh city involved over 40 participants through interviews and focus groups, as well as a co-produced animation and community event to discuss findings (see Rabaiotti, 2024b). The research showed warm hubs function as:

- Warm (free) spaces – offering comfort and hospitality for those in poverty
- Safe (inclusive) spaces – non-judgemental and supportive environments
- Welcoming (connecting) spaces – relationship building and reducing loneliness
- Learning spaces – building knowledge, skills and community engagement

Whilst developed as a response poverty response, the standout finding was the benefits of social connections from warm hubs to support well-being and inclusion. However, some participants felt there were people who would particularly benefit from warm hubs that were not accessing them and more could be done to maximise the potential of these spaces and their place in the community. For example, could warm hubs help build social capital for people on probation to support desistance?

A follow up research project continues until 2027, as part of Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD) seeking to understand the wider impact and potential for warm hubs across Wales for excluded populations. The study explores access & inclusion within warm hubs and their contribution to

addressing social and health inequalities in communities. It examines overlaps between warm hubs, community hubs and wider inclusion policies.

With 176 survey responses collected from warm hub coordinators and volunteers during February and March 2026, early findings show warm hubs can provide non-judgmental support for people affected by addiction and help for individuals experiencing homelessness, including signposting to housing and welfare services. They can offer increases in confidence, self-worth, and social connection. Direct testimonies indicate warm hubs act as lifelines for highly marginalised groups, offering safety, food, stability, and positive relationships.

Implications for Probation in Wales

The inclusion health and warm hub models highlight the opportunity for probation to become localised and community-integrated, by meaningfully collaborating across health, voluntary, and community sectors. For people on probation, this has the potential to provide access to relationship-centred, holistic support, which can address housing, health and wellbeing, and social needs, that can complement supervision under community orders. Such approaches align with the Wales Probation Development Group's vision for a devolved, community-driven probation model capable of reducing reoffending and enhancing wellbeing.

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Desistance-Oriented Technology – The “My Journey” app

Dr. Gemma Morgan – Swansea University

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on integrating digital technology within the criminal justice system (CJS). Historically, much of this technological expansion has been utilised for surveillance and monitoring purposes, such as tracking compliance with probation conditions. However, a new wave of innovation is shifting the focus toward the development of desistance-oriented technology. A prime example of this shift is "My Journey", a web-based application specifically designed to support individuals in the CJS by prioritising human agency and strengths-based support.

Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice

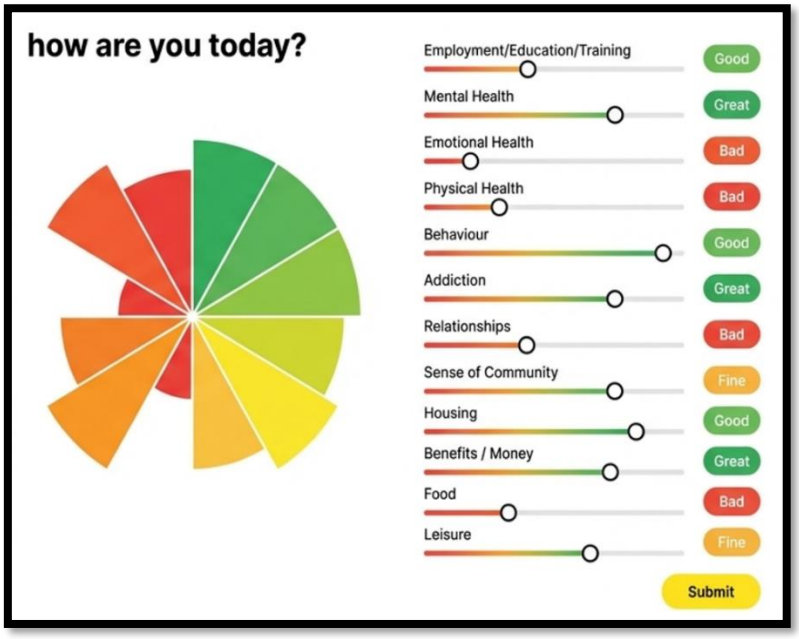
Developed by me (Dr Gemma Morgan at Swansea University) in partnership with the third-sector organisation Include UK and the Innovation Lab Wales, "My Journey" was born from a simple realisation: while desistance theories emphasise the importance of human relationships and personal agency, most digital tools in the justice sector do not. The app was built using a Double Diamond co-design methodology, involving 41 individuals with lived experience of the CJS (Include UK’s Members) and five practitioners. This collaborative approach ensured the technology was not just "done to" the users but created "with" them, making it responsive to their needs and realities.

A Closer Look at the App’s Features

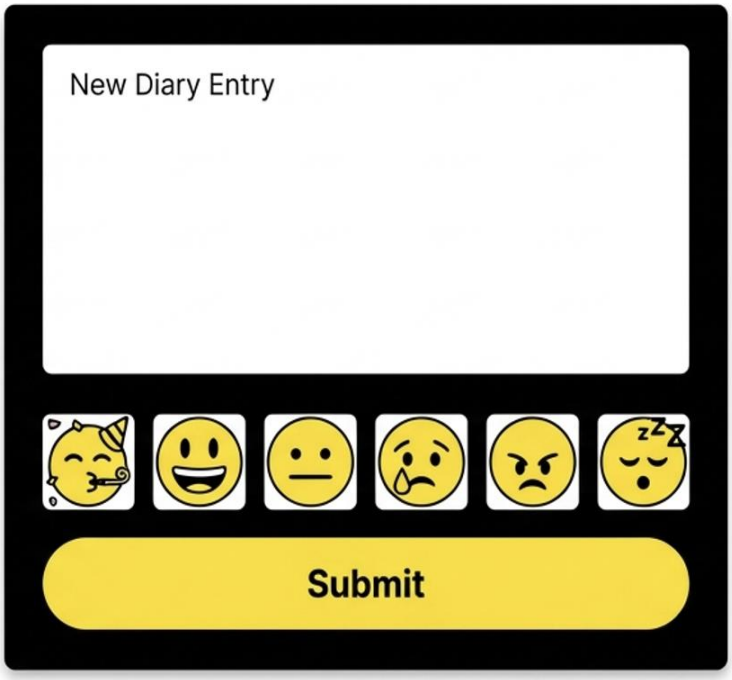
Accessibility was a primary concern. Gemma’s previous research highlighted that people are in the CJS are disproportionately digitally excluded compared to the general population (Morgan et al., 2025). To combat digital exclusion, "My Journey" was developed as a web-based app rather than a mobile one, allowing users to access it via community tablets and computers if they lacked a smartphone or data.

The Member Experience - The *member’s homepage* uses visual icons and high-contrast colours to accommodate varying literacy levels.

One of the standout features is the *Wellbeing/Needs Assessment*. Unlike traditional risk assessments, this allows individuals to self-identify their needs across 12 domains, such as housing, addiction, and emotional health. Users use a sliding scale to rate their current state, giving them agency in their own support journey. The scale is scored from 1 to 10, if a member scores a domain under 5 the app generates links to local/national support services that can help them with that particular need:

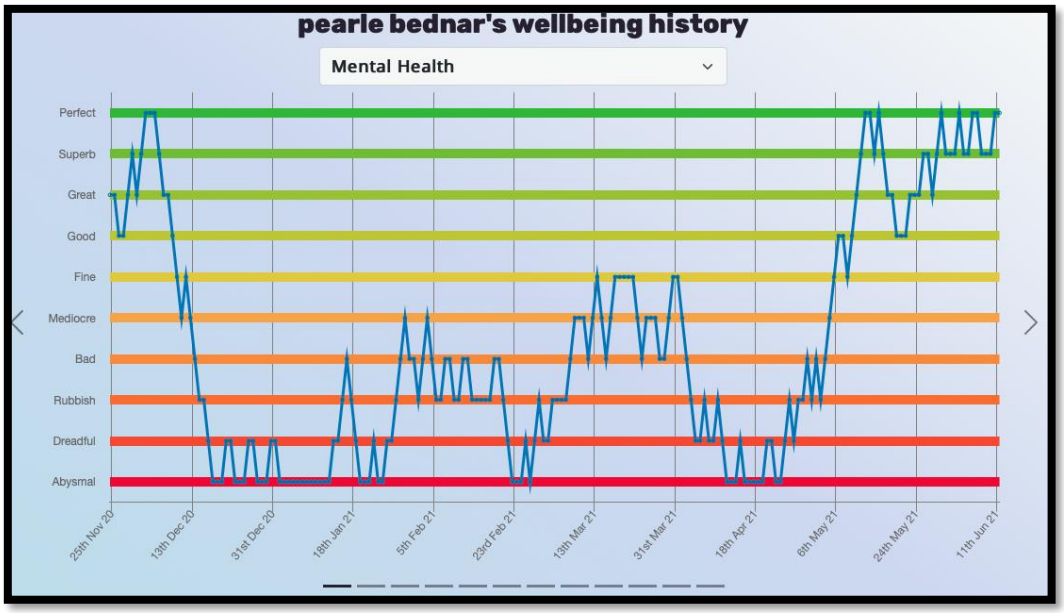


The *Journal* feature further supports this by allowing users to log their mood using emojis, bypassing literacy barriers while providing practitioners with a holistic view of the individual's wellbeing.



Empowering Practitioners - For staff, the app provides a sophisticated *Practitioner Dashboard* that moves beyond simple case notes.

Built-in AI analytics track a member's progress over time. If a practitioner notices a sharp decline in an individual's wellbeing metrics, they can intervene proactively before a crisis occurs. This demonstrates the app's core philosophy: technology should complement and enhance, rather than replace, human relationships.



Challenges and the Road Ahead

Implementation of "My Journey" revealed that technology does not exist in a vacuum. Onboarding users with complex needs often require intensive, one-to-one staff support. Furthermore, the sustainability of such tools remains tied to consistent funding, which is a significant hurdle for the third sector. Despite these challenges, "My Journey" represents a vital shift toward capital-enhancing technology. It provides a platform where individuals can track their own growth, set goals, and access a directory of local services to build the social capital necessary for long-term desistance. As we look to the future of digital justice, "My Journey" serves as a blueprint for how we can translate complex theories/research into practical, user-centred tools that truly support people in their journey away from crime and to happier and healthier futures.

For more information, visit: https://my-journey.uk

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Fostering safety and growth in probation: Goal planning with people on probation and trauma informed supervision for staff

Professor Jason Davies – Swansea University

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Introduction

This presentation examined two approaches to fostering safety and growth within probation practice. The first provided a spotlight on a structured way to reconnect probation practice with goal planning and review, and the second promoting a trauma informed approach to practitioner supervision and support.

Goal Planning in Probation Practice – Using a structured approach to foster safety and growth

Goal planning is an essential component of effective probation work, serving as a structured mechanism for promoting engagement, supporting desistance, and helping individuals navigate and overcome barriers to change. Effective goal planning enables meaningful goals to be identified rather than goals being imposed; assists with prioritising and sequencing areas of need and establishes a personalised framework for monitoring progress over time. Goal planning allows Risk, Needs and Responsivity (Bonta & Andrews, 2017) and Good Lives (Ward, 2002) approaches to be brought to life via a personalised approach to reducing risk and creating sustainable alternatives to crime.

The Goals and Plans Card Sort Task (Davies et al, 2022, 2024) provides a structured framework for exploring major life domains through a collaborative and person-centred dialogue. Through identifying goals and examining their relative importance to the person, this approach is rooted in the individual's own values, motivations, and situational context. Attention to factors such as an individual's sense of agency and control, their plans and strategies for achieving the goal, the resources needed, barriers to achieving the goal and their commitment to goal achievement allow probation staff to target support, guidance, advice and intervention whilst also monitoring goal attainment.

The research underpinning this approach suggests that perceived levels of agency and control vary across goals and that goal detail typically reveals key information to inform risk management and safety planning. It also provides a way for risk reduction and pro-social development to be personally meaningful and directly connected to those goals which are most important to the individual. These might

include goals linked to ‘home and future living’, ‘relationships’ and ‘learning and working’. As with the wider population, it also enables an emphasis on ‘approach’ rather than ‘avoidance’ goals which may assist with improving goal success.

Trauma-Informed Supervision for Probation Staff

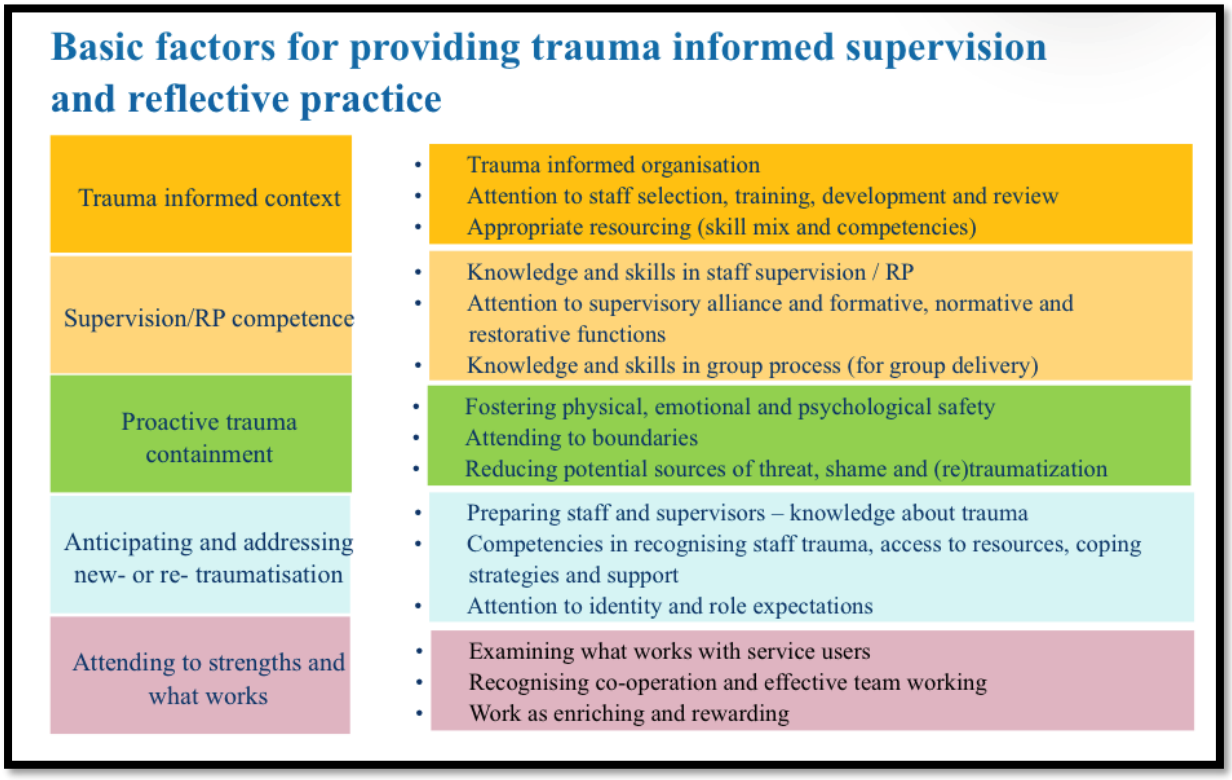
In recent years, there has been a growing focus on trauma-informed practice within criminal justice settings. This has been driven, in part, by recognition of the extent to which multiple experiences of childhood adversity and adult trauma is present amongst those within the criminal justice system. Consequently, probation professionals frequently work with individuals who have lived through significant adversity, and who frequently have multiple and complex trauma histories. Alongside this, research from other forensic settings suggests that many staff will have direct personal experience of adversity, loss, or trauma from outside the work context. In addition, staff may be exposed to a mixture of acute incidents, such as direct threats or aggression, and chronic stressors, including high workloads and resource constraints. Within this potentially ‘trauma full’ and traumatizing work context, staff undertake work that is often emotionally demanding, complex and can present a high level of potential personal and professional risk. These experiences create conditions in which trauma responses—both overt and subtle—can shape staff wellbeing and professional functioning.

Trauma-informed staff supervision and reflective practice (Davies & Jones, 2024) builds upon existing staff supervision practice within forensic contexts (Davies, 2015). It seeks to develop and provide a more detailed framework for the restorative (supportive) function of supervision, whilst maintaining attention on the formative (learning) and normative (professional and ethical) aspects of supervision. Key principles include anticipating potential re-traumatisation, foregrounding strengths, and proactively containing emotional responses rather than merely reacting to crises. Supervisors play a critical role by providing staff with reflective spaces where reactions can be processed safely and constructively and signposting to support can be provided where this is needed.

A trauma-informed supervisory approach fosters an understanding of the potential cognitive, emotional, and behavioural impacts of trauma and cumulative stress, and different approaches to anticipate and respond to these. This enhances skills and capacity across the workforce to recognise trauma responses - both in themselves and in others - and enables early access to coping strategies, resources, and further support when needed. It also supports staff in their work providing trauma-informed care and interventions to those on probation.

Psychological safety is central to this model. Effective supervision fosters an environment characterised by clear boundaries, respect, predictability, and openness. Reducing sources of shame, threat, or perceived judgement helps staff discuss challenges without fear of negative consequences. Such safety supports not only emotional wellbeing but also professional learning and resilience.

Finally, trauma-informed supervision acknowledges the relational nature of probation work. Team cooperation, reflective dialogue, and recognition of progress and success can contribute to a culture in which staff can experience their work as meaningful, enriching, and sustainable despite the demands, challenges and distress present within probation working.



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Re-Imagining Probation in the Community: Grand Avenues

Professor Mike Maguire (USW), Dr. Sue Thomas (USW) and Professor Kate Williams (Aberystwyth University)

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Introduction

The Grand Avenues (GA) project was launched in the Cardiff wards of Caerau and Ely in October 2021. Its core aim was to test the value and practicality of carrying out Probation supervision of men from these wards in local premises such as community centres, rather than in the main Probation offices in the city centre (Westgate Street, WS), and in close cooperation with commissioned third sector partner organisations based in the same buildings. While similar arrangements have been made for women, it is unusual - if not unique - for virtually all men on a community sentence or post-release licence in a specific area to be supervised in this way. Moreover, the project has always been intended to be more than simply 'probation in the community'. Initially, it was strongly influenced by ideas from the community development field, linking the aim of 'reintegrating' individual offenders with that of improving safety and building capacity in the community as a whole. This would involve encouraging men on Probation to engage with other local residents in pro-social activities, for example by attending the premises outside their appointment times to socialise or take part in organised community activities such as gardening, walks, or sport. It would also involve more work with their families rather than with the individual alone.

GA is intended to be a long-term project, and to be evaluated over an extended period. Its ideas and practices have developed iteratively in response to experience, and it has already undergone several changes of premises and core partners. This brief paper will summarise the main findings of the evaluation to date, outlining how far the initial vision has been turned into reality and giving a flavour, based on both interviews and frequent observation, of how the project has been experienced by both probation officers and men on probation.

The vision and the reality

It should first be noted that we found relatively little progress taking place in perhaps the most ambitious element of the plan, to involve Probation officers (POs) in promoting community development. Likewise, although there appears to have been some increase in home visiting, the aim of significantly expanding work with families had yet to be achieved. However, a number of important changes were observed in aspects of Probation practice, most of which were looked upon favourably by both POs and the men under supervision.

Almost all the men on the scheme greatly preferred the local reporting and supervision arrangements to those experienced in the city centre, WS. This was not only because of the greater convenience of having only to walk down the road rather than take buses

to WS, but also because of the more comfortable and relaxed surroundings (including being welcomed and offered refreshments by third sector staff or peer mentors), the frequent availability of either staff from the co-located partner organisations or visiting service agencies to help with practical problems, and opportunities to engage with POs informally (e.g. over a cup of tea) outside their appointments.

Many of the men on Probation and POs interviewed also stated that they had formed closer and more trusting, relationships than in the past. For example:

> ‘I actually look forward to coming in and speaking to [PO]’. (POP 8)

> ‘This is the best Probation has ever worked for me, one million per cent’. (POP 14)

> ‘Weirdly, Probation is probably the best thing that's happened to me…. I feel like I've had more opportunity, and I've grown more as a person by coming here’. (POP8)

> ‘For me seeing the amount of men who have built up to being able to share and have really deep open discussions is really powerful and I think that’s making a huge difference to them’. (PO 6)

It was also pointed out by POs that in normal circumstances changes of supervising officer can hinder relationship building, but on GA the men often met and got to know all the POs based there, so any such changes were less stressful and bonds were retained:

> ‘It's less traumatic for them when … you're moving from me to (another PO) who you've seen all the time’. (PO 2)

POs generally agreed that the number of times they initiated breach proceedings had fallen considerably – partly because they felt they had more discretion than in an office environment, but mainly because compliance by men was greater on GA:

> ‘So, people on probation I think have better compliance here and I think they also get more out of probation. …. more progress, more skills, more benefits than... the central reporting centre. I think that’s huge.’ (PO 6)

> ‘[In GA] We've all kind of had the, okay, they haven’t turned up today. Let's give them until the end of the week. ... And I think levels of engagement ... improved because of it’. (PO 2)

The co-location of Probation with local third sector organisations and the frequent presence of other service providers allows quicker appointments and resolutions of problems with housing, employment and so on:

> ‘What I’m saying, the good thing about this place … everything is in the same building… I can come here and see somebody straight away …. and I find that things get done quicker here because everyone is together’. (POP 2)

> ‘Even though I've been under the mental health system, I couldn't access counselling through that, but I can through this’. (POP 7)

> ‘[Support worker] sorted out my sick benefit for me …. and now I've been awarded my PIP and that. There’s no reason for me to commit any offences.’ (POP 11)

The embedding of GA in the local community and the encouragement to the men to get involved in pro-social activities was said to have significantly increased the chances of ex-prisoners, especially, becoming reintegrated into normal aspects of community life:

> ‘In WS you'd …. see somebody chatting to somebody in the waiting room and ...generally, it'll be, "I was two-ed up with him in Parc," that kind of thing. Whereas (here) it's always, "I was in school with him. I've known him since I was little" ’. (PO 2)

> ‘I've got this organisation to go to, I've got that organisation. I've got this person; I've got that person. There's lots of different avenues to go down’. (POP 1)

> ‘I wasn't going out the house, I wasn't doing nothing, but I'm involved with the men's group on the Fridays. So, it's really helped me this place. I didn't want to mingle with people; I wanted to be on my own... Very anxious. I'm on tablets for it and stuff. But that's getting much better now’. (POP 3)

> ‘Yes, probation is just a tiny little aspect of it. But the whole aspect really is being part of the community, and you feel part of the community…. and if you do something constructive like volunteering, that makes you feel good as well’. (POP 1)

As illustrated above, comments from interviewees were generally very positive about the scheme, but there were also negative reactions and some difficult organisational problems which created challenges for those managing the project. POs noted that not all those under supervision responded better to GA. Some remained difficult to work with and some failed to take advantage of services. It should also be emphasised that although access to services was better than under ‘normal’ Probation supervision, some entrenched problems remained as difficult as ever to resolve. For example:

> ‘There's no magic pathway to getting someone a house. I'm in that queue the same way that they're in that queue on the phone, and stuff. ... the power to do these things, is non-existent. … rather than, "I will get you a flat." It's, "we're going to look at the opportunities and get you in the best place to get one."’ (PO 1)

Finally, it is important not to underestimate the challenges involved in finding suitable premises and setting up and running a complex project with vulnerable and sometimes unpredictable service users, hedged by statutory obligations to implement court sentences and to assess and manage risks to staff and the public, at the same time

working with partner organisations which may have only a limited understanding of Probation and its obligations. As noted earlier, the project moved premises and commissioned different partners a number of times, sometimes in response to differences of view about ideology, about rules (especially concerning risks) governing how the venue was run, or about how to respond to a particular problem.

Conclusion

GA has always faced the challenge of delivering national strategies and standards within a semi-autonomous local service which has to take many strategic, commissioning and operational decisions in response to specific local circumstances, as well as working in close partnership with a variety of local organisations. Our evaluation indicates that it has so far risen to the challenge well. It has delivered Probation supervision in more relaxing circumstances, allowing deeper engagement with many of the men, swifter resolution of many problems, and increased engagement with the local community. It has also handled problems skilfully when they arise. This underlines our conclusion that if the project is 'replicated' elsewhere, lessons learned from Caerau-Ely will be invaluable, but that it would be a mistake to provide a detailed 'blueprint' to follow: each local area is different, as are the local organisations and available community premises. While following general aims and principles, each new 'GA' will have to respond creatively to the specific circumstances it faces. There is also scope for more progress on the two aspects of the original concept of GA that are as yet underdeveloped: a focus on community development, and more work with families.

Irish Probation Work as Social Work

Vivian Geiran, Adjunct Assistant Professor, School of Social Work & Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin and former Director of the Irish Probation Service

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Prynhawn da / Good afternoon, dear colleagues, and friends. It is a privilege to speak at this symposium on the local futures for probation in Wales — a nation with a strong sense of community, identity, and social justice, and one that is continually shaping its own distinctive voice within a complex justice landscape. It is also great to be here to mark the retirement of Prof. Peter Raynor, and on a day when the Wales rugby team are in my own hometown of Dublin to take on Ireland in the Six Nations Championship.

Peter Raynor's long reach and enduring and impactful influence in the field of probation and community justice is hugely significant - in Ireland as much as anywhere else. I first met Peter in or around 1991 when he came to Dublin as a guest of our then Probation and Welfare Service, to present to a large group of Probation Officers, including myself, on the developments in What Works and the implications of RNR for probation in Ireland. That workshop set Irish probation on a practice track that has continued to evolve ever since.

In a context of considering what "local futures" might truly mean for probation, in Wales and more widely in these islands, I want to reflect on two things:

First, what learning there might be from the experience of probation in Ireland; and second, why the enduring connection between probation and social work still matters — perhaps now more than ever.

The Meaning of "Local" in a Welsh Context

Far be it for me to speak of the future of probation in Wales, and yet it seems that we cannot avoid acknowledging the structural context in which it sits, including tensions that are not just constitutional; but practical and lived. As I understand it, the call for greater alignment between probation and devolved services has been examined in the work of the Commission on Justice in Wales. I also understand that there continues an important national conversation: that justice policy, to be effective, must connect meaningfully with the social systems that shape people's lives.

And that brings me to the heart of probation's identity. Probation is not simply a function of the criminal justice system. It is, or should be, a bridge — between courts and communities, between accountability and opportunity, between harm and hope.

In considering "local futures," then we must ask:

- How might probation design reflect local communities?
- How can partnerships with housing, health services, and local authorities not just be transactional but relational?
- How can effective services be developed that reflect language, culture, and community strengths?

Localism, if it is to mean anything, must go beyond administrative geography. It must mean proximity to people — and responsiveness to place.

Reflections from Ireland: A Different Constitutional Settlement

The Irish Probation Service sits within our Department of Justice. It is a national service, delivered locally. Its identity has been shaped, historically and philosophically, by its roots in social work and its connections across the jurisdictions of our neighbouring islands. That heritage has not disappeared — it continues to influence recruitment, training, and professional ethos.

The foundational probation legislation in these islands - the Probation of Offenders Act, 1907, is still operational in Ireland. Although our legislature has added to the probation legislation, introducing Community Service in 1983, Youth Justice legislation in 2001 and various laws providing for the post-release supervision of increasing numbers of persons exiting custody, the original 1907 legislation remains a constant reminder of the shared history with our UK sister jurisdictions and is still very much going strong in Ireland.

In Ireland, probation officers are trained social workers. The service's approach has consistently emphasised:

- Rehabilitation as a social process
- Desistance as relational
- Supervision as purposeful engagement
- Community sanctions as credible alternatives to custody

There is a level of clarity there: probation is not merely enforcement in the community; it is a professional intervention rooted in social understanding. Do we get everything right in Ireland? Of course not.

What is striking is not that Ireland has avoided challenges — it has not. Like all systems, it grapples with risk management pressures, public protection demands, and resource constraints. Most of all perhaps, the Probation Service in Ireland has struggled for over half a century at least from the problems arising from the fact that

the pool of social workers is too small and the various agencies employing social workers are all competing to recruit from that small pool.

For far too long, Irish Probation has operated ‘an Irish solution to this Irish problem’: We always say we are a social work-based organisation and practice; and that we want to employ Social Workers as Probation Officers. While I was Probation Service Director, I managed to introduce a requirement that all new Probation Officers be registered Social Workers. Unfortunately, that has been changed again since I retired back to a preference, but not requirement, for social workers. I have written about all this on a number of occasions, most recently in an article published in the *Probation Journal* last September.

But what endures throughout is the conceptual anchor: probation as social work within justice. That continuing connection offers Ireland, and perhaps Wales — and indeed other jurisdictions — an important point of reflection.

Probation and Social Work: An Enduring Connection

Across England and Wales, probation has undergone significant restructuring over the past decade. Reforms, fragmentation, reunification — each has left its mark on professional identity. In the process, it seems to me that something fundamental has sometimes felt at risk: the sense of probation as a human service profession.

The social work connection matters for several reasons:

1. It grounds practice in context

People in contact with probation are rarely defined by one offence. Their lives are all too often shaped by trauma, poverty, mental health challenges, addiction, exclusion, and inequality. Social work training insists on seeing the whole person in their environment.

2. It emphasises relationships

Desistance research tells us that change is relational. Trust, legitimacy, consistency — these are not soft concepts. They are core mechanisms of change.

3. It balances care and control

Probation has always operated in that space. Social work does not deny risk or harm; it frames intervention as purposeful, ethical, and proportionate.

The Irish experience shows that retaining a professional social work identity does not weaken public protection. It strengthens legitimacy as well as serving to safeguard the public and those caught up in the criminal justice system.

The Future: What Should We Safeguard?

As Wales considers its local future — whether within current structures or in any future devolved arrangement — there are some principles, I suggest, worth considering and perhaps safeguarding. First, that probation remain embedded in communities. Co-location with other services, strong ties to local authorities, and culturally competent practice are not optional extras.

Second, professional identity matters. Whether through social work qualification or equivalent professional frameworks, we should protect probation as a skilled, reflective practice — not reduce it to simple surveillance or technical case processing.

Third, partnership must be real. Housing, health, third sector partners and others are not peripheral — they are central to reducing reoffending and supporting desistance.

Fourth, we should resist a purely managerial future. Data matters. Accountability and performance matters. But relationships change lives.

A Final Reflection

Probation's story, in Wales, Ireland, and elsewhere, is a story of adaptation. From its origins in faith-based and voluntary efforts, through professionalisation, through reform and restructuring, the central question has remained remarkably consistent: How do we hold people accountable in ways that also enable them to change?

The Irish experience may serve to remind us that the answer need not abandon social work roots in order to meet modern demands. And Wales, with its strong public service ethos and commitment to partnership, is perhaps uniquely placed to shape a model of probation that is:

- Locally grounded
- Professionally confident
- Socially informed
- And future-facing

If the future of probation in Wales is to be truly local, then it must not only sit in Welsh communities — it must belong to them. And if we are to learn anything from Ireland, it is this: probation is strongest when it remembers who it is.

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View from the field - Reflections from Napo Cymru

Rachael Mages, Napo Cymru

Good afternoon, I am Rachael Mages, I have been a qualified Probation officer for over 21 years and currently based in Dyfed Powys. With me is Lee Hoyles and Lauren Scott both Probation Officers in South Wales & Su McConnel, who continues to actively support us within NAPO Cymru even after retirement.

We're here today to celebrate Professor Peter Raynor, not just his retirement, but his life's work, which has shaped how probation understands itself. I met Professor Raynor in my early days as a Trainee Probation Officer and I want to start by naming one of his most important contributions to the field: "the evidence that without a skilled, professional relationship at the heart of probation supervision, everything else, every programme, every tool, every intervention is likely to fail."

Professor Raynor was never vague about that. His research demonstrated again and again that effective practice is fundamentally 'human'. It's relational, it's skilled, and it requires time, professional discretion, and organisational conditions that allow practitioners to build trust.

That truth is as relevant today as when Professor Raynor first published it, perhaps more relevant, because the environments we now work in, often make that relationship the hardest thing to protect and that brings me to why this panel matters. We have all the academics, practitioners, students and sector partners in one room. If we are going to talk honestly about the future of probation in Wales, then this is the moment.

So let me ground it in the reality on the front line. People still join probation with the same values we all recognise, wanting to make a difference, wanting to work with people, wanting to help individuals make their live safer, more stable. But…. they're entering a service with unsustainable workloads, pay that doesn't reflect the level of professional responsibility, and very limited investment in training or practice development, and these pressures erode the very thing Professor Raynor's research says is the keystone of effective supervision "the professional, skilled relationship".

It's no wonder recruitment and retention are in crisis. It's not the values of new staff that have changed, it's the context they're dropped into, and for our former colleagues in the room Su, Mark, Ella, Professor Raynor himself, the service has changed so dramatically that in many places you might not even recognise it.

So, a question for us all here "Is the evidence base you built still being used? And if it isn't, what needs to shift for it to matter again?"

There's also a wider Welsh context. We have brilliant voluntary sector partners and when services are locally rooted, community based, and not hollowed out by corporate contracting, they genuinely transform lives. But even the best commissioned service can't compensate for the hollowing out of the core Probation Officer role.

And if we want the kind of practice Professor Raynor advocated relational, skilled, reflective, then we need an organisation that allows it to breathe.

That means investment in people. It means pay that reflects the seriousness of the work. It means training and professional development that doesn't disappear the moment workloads rise. It means genuine collaboration with Welsh organisations who know their communities, Safer Wales being a prime example and it means giving practitioners space for critical reflection. The Inspectorate's recent work on Human Factors is a reminder that culture matters, if we want better decision making, safer practice, less bias, and stronger teams, then we must build systems around learning, not fear.

Finally, a note from outside England and Wales. Brian Heath in Jersey proved heroically that probation can be protected from centralisation. Jersey still has Probation Officers as "social workers to the courts," lower custody rates, better reconviction outcomes, and an identity rooted in skilled relational work. It shows what's possible when a jurisdiction refuses to give up on the professional relationship as the foundation of public protection.

So, my opening question for our panel and for all of us is this,

If the evidence is clear, and has been for decades, what do we need to change, organisationally, politically, culturally, to create a probation environment where skilled, relational practice isn't the exception we fight for, but the norm we expect?"

View from the Field - Reflections from Safer Wales

Simon Borja, Safer Wales

The voluntary sector plays a vital and increasingly recognised role in delivering effective, person-centred support for people in contact with the Criminal Justice System. At Safer Wales, our work with the Probation Service demonstrates how independent, community-based organisations that can deliver specialist, responsive services that complement statutory provision and help individuals achieve safer, more stable futures.

Recent engagement at the Local Futures Probation event provided an opportunity to highlight our collaborative work, including the Castle House Women's Centre and our Young Adult Hub. These services demonstrate what can be achieved when voluntary and statutory partners share a commitment to relational practice,

holistic support, and trauma-informed, gender- and age-responsive approaches. Operating in the community enables us to provide flexible and accessible support.

Alongside this, the Annual Wales Social Justice Conference, delivered in partnership with Clinks and Inside Out, brought together the third sector and statutory agencies to explore how we collectively shape a fairer and more effective community justice landscape in Wales. Discussions across the conference reaffirmed the central value of voluntary sector leadership: our closeness to communities, our independence, and our ability to innovate and advocate for those with lived experience.

Probation, local partnership and community: Afternoon reflections

Brian Heath MBE and Ella Rabaiotti

After the predominantly academic inputs from the symposium, the views shared from the field were warmly welcomed. The speech from Rachael Mages, on behalf of Napo Cymru, emphasised the contributions by Professor Peter Raynor: that the heart of effective probation is a skilled, human, trusting relationship between practitioner and client. Rachael highlighted that unless organisations create the conditions for that relationship to flourish, no tool, programme, or intervention will succeed.

Napo's contribution was followed by an overview of the work of Safer Wales, by its Director, Bernie-Bown Thompson. Safer Wales is a voluntary sector organisation whose mission is to support, protect and empower groups who are often invisible in society - whether victims of crime or exploitation, or people who have offended (and, as we know, individuals can be both). Bernie highlighted their work with women who have offended as well as with young adults, offering community-based probation away from the formal probation office environment in Cardiff.

A panel consisting of representatives from Napo and Safer Wales then led discussions with delegates. Chaired by former Chief Probation Officer for Jersey, Mr Brian Heath MBE, he offered three reflections from the session.

Firstly, he noted concerns describing an insidious and pervasive impact on culture of a top-down, tick-box performance indicator approach, which can stifle innovation and professional curiosity.

Secondly, he reflected on how commissioning of services, rather than genuine partnership working, can inhibit agencies from playing to their strengths.

Linked to this was a third point: the challenge of funding, including the difficulties faced by local charities when competing against large national organisations in bidding processes. Some smaller charities have apparently come to believe, rightly or wrongly, that it is not worth their while to bid.

These issues strengthen the case for devolved commissioning within Wales, either within HMPPS or through Welsh partners, as explored in the Memorandum of Understanding with the Welsh Government (an announcement on this followed the symposium – see references).

Sustainable long-term funding remains a challenge for the voluntary sector in supporting people who have offended in Wales, including the failure to fund work after promising or successful pilots. Social bridging finance may offer a potential solution (see, for example, Mazzei et al., 2025), and this approach has already been applied in Jersey for a project supporting vulnerable women.

Further feedback from the conference emphasised the need for probation to work more closely within communities and to build meaningful partnerships - improving relationships with partners and service users and strengthening engagement with people on probation and with communities.

There was interest in developing further research into the use of community hubs, building on the inputs relating to warm hubs, Grand Avenues and Safer Wales. Early scoping work is underway to identify other potential community hubs for probation. However, it was noted that this needs to be balanced with concerns about safety when working in out-of-office environments.

In drawing the symposium to a close, these discussions underscored a shared commitment to strengthening probation practice in Wales through collaboration, community engagement and a renewed focus on the human relationships at the heart of effective supervision - an insight championed throughout Professor Peter Raynor's work. The reflections offered, on culture, commissioning, funding and innovation, highlight both the challenges and the significant opportunities ahead. What emerged most clearly was a collective ambition to create the conditions in which probation practitioners, voluntary sector partners, researchers and communities can work together more effectively, ensuring that services are not only evidence-informed but rooted in trust, partnership and local need. As Wales continues to explore devolved approaches, community-based models and new forms of service delivery, the symposium also highlighted rich opportunities for further research and co-produced learning.

References

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