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RILEY, Laura

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Youth Offending to the Probation Service - why meaningful transition matters

Laura Riley, Senior Lecturer Criminal Justice
Sheffield Hallam University

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The milestone of becoming an adult is much more than reaching your 18th Birthday. Whilst society no longer requires parental consent in decision making and offers new opportunities such as the ability to vote, purchase alcohol, cigarettes and lottery tickets, little attention is given to the other less potentially 'exciting' responsibilities that an individual might find themselves responsible for, or the skills needed to navigate the 'adult world'. There is no manual of 'how to become an adult', less so how to become an adult whilst on probation but the importance of this transition is now being addressed by the probation service (HMPPSa: 2022).

Young adults need to be prepared for what adult probation entails, understand how it may differ from youth offending and appreciate any resulting consequences. This can be difficult for a group where emotional and cognitive maturation has not fully developed. When a young person transitions to adult services, the support they had been receiving may no longer be available resulting in a loss of relationships or the available provision may not meet the needs of the individual in previously identified and necessary way (one example here is social workers addressing child protection concerns). It has thus been argued that young adults require a tailored approach because the transitional period can result in increased vulnerability requiring higher levels of practical and emotional support (Hughes and Strong: 2016).

As a former probation officer and now lecturer in criminal justice I have observed these challenges directly. We often use sophisticated language in enforcement communication, induction paperwork and interventions (even those that are adapted) which many young adults may struggle to fully understand. We also introduce new processes that a young person may be subject to following non-compliance - such as recall on licence and breach



Laura Riley

Senior Lecturer Criminal Justice
Sheffield Hallam University

of community penalties - whilst simultaneously trying to establish and navigate new relationships. One stark difference I identified in moving from working in adult probation to youth offending related to the breach process. Having previously chaired compliance meetings for young people subject to YOS management, the decision-making process regarding returning an order to Court for non-compliance is subject to much greater levels of discretion and provides the young person an opportunity to demonstrate improved attendance and engagement before any action is taken. In comparison, the two-warning process implemented in adult probation is far less responsive and can result in young people being returned to court more quickly, and is thus more likely to result in further criminal convictions.

Having worked in youth offending and adult probation services pre- and post-unification I have observed the variations in the process of transferring of young adults from the Youth Offending Service (YOS) to Probation. Very often this is just a process 'on paper' whilst what happens in practice is dependent upon on local resources and provision. Prior to June 2021 this also depended on whether the young adult was managed by the National Probation Service or Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC). Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation report into transitions arrangements in 2012 identified the need for clearer preparation to ensure continuity of service which was effective for the individual and not just procedural. The subsequent reinspection in 2016 identified insufficient improvement had been made to the quality of work undertaken during transition which was "not always well organised, recorded or smooth" (HMIP: 2016), advising previous recommendations should be fully implemented. The reunification of probation services last year has resulted in service wide reform impacting the opportunity for significant progress to be realised.

The potential risks of a process led transition is that person specific needs and vulnerabilities of young people moving between services can be overlooked or lost. People of colour will present with further needs which need addressing over and above the issues I have identified here. I do not have the space to explore this in greater depth, but it goes without saying that the Probation Service needs to take this seriously, especially considering HMI Probation's (2021) thematic review of racial inequality. I remember countless supervision sessions with a young adult discussing their personal experiences

where significant information was disclosed that I was not aware of, and they were surprised I had not received the information prior to me seeing them. This can result in people feeling that their experiences are neither valued nor significant enough to warrant being shared and acknowledged. Brewster's (2019) research on the neuroscientific turn in youth to adult (Y2A) transitions policy shows that this understanding of transition - often referred to as the 'direct transfer of responsibility' - overlooks broader issues. The transactional process of transferring a case file containing pertinent and sensitive information regarding an individual - often still a child - is an adult procedure. Moreover, this is a far cry from the 'child first' approach being implemented by the Youth Justice Board for children and young people involved with youth offending services.

Relationships are important to young people's engagement with the service (Livingstone et al: 2015) and probation practitioners - like the young adults they work with - need to be prepared for how their knowledge, practice, and skills will be different when working with older people or those with developed maturity. Specifically, they need to be able to respond to needs, vulnerabilities, and varied levels of maturity. In my experience little training was provided prior to commencing such work, with a greater responsibility being placed upon practitioners to 'upskill' themselves and seek out development opportunities. This is reflected in the current management framework which acknowledges that learning and development is key to supporting practitioners in undertaking responsive work.

As such, material can be accessed via the learning and development team, learning platform, briefings, evidence-based summaries and third sector learning resources. Given the organisational challenges that the Probation Service is currently facing post-unification - specifically around staff retention and excessive workload - it could be argued that this approach is not supportive of a learning centred environment where practitioners are afforded the capacity to read and reflect, develop the necessary and required skills to understand and deliver tailored work to improve outcomes for young adults. This could be heightened further where practitioners manage a generic caseload. I am therefore pleased to see transitional hub pilots once again emerging, having worked in one in 2014 and seen the benefits not only to my own development but, more importantly, in increased engagement and improved outcomes for young people.

Following probation reunification in June 2021 a new Joint National Protocol for Transitions was implemented by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and the Probation Service to support effective transition between YOS and adult probation services. The 'overriding objective' of the protocol and effective transition process is a safe transition for the child and their community (HMPPS & YJB: 2021). This is coupled with the Probation Service's Management of Young Adults framework which identifies four key aims to support staff in applying good practice with young adults: to adhere to youth to adult transition process identified in the joint national protocol for transition; understand and respond to the particular needs of young adults; assess and respond to maturity levels at critical points of contact and recognise and consider the impact of intersectionality on engagement (HMPPSb: 2022). This - hopefully - underpins the

organisation's recognition of the need for change and action. It is too early for the impact of the new framework and protocol to be fully assessed and evaluated. It does, however, establish the opportunity to develop the way we work with young adults under probation supervision, impact their transition into adulthood and ensure that moving between the two organisations is not a process but works to enable the achievement of better outcomes.

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