

Title: Young Adults' Experiences of a Specialist Probation Hub: Procedural Justice, Trust and Hope

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Abstract

There are growing calls for young adults (18- to 25-year-olds) in the criminal justice system to be treated as a distinct group and for service responses more attuned to this developmental life-course phase. This article draws on an evaluation of a specialist young adult probation ‘Hub’ analysing results within a linked conceptual framework of procedural justice, building trust and instilling hope. A dominant finding was how the bespoke Hub service and the probation practice that flowed from it, led young adults to experience it as a service they wanted to engage with, that had tangible benefits and which led to a more substantive form of compliance. The article contributes valuable insights and knowledge on procedural justice in young adult probation.

Key words -young adults, criminal justice; probation practice, procedural justice, penal supervision, substantive compliance

Introduction

A different, age-appropriate, form of practice focused on young adults (18-25-years) in the criminal justice system is emerging in England and Wales¹. Evidence can be found in court sentencing (Sentencing Council, 2026), in prison system arrangements (H. M. Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021) and within probation practice (H.M. Inspectorate of Probation, 2024). These developments are driven by insights from the neurosciences and psychology on ‘developing maturity’ that spans adolescence into the mid-twenties impacting behavioural and decision-

¹ The United Kingdom comprises three separate justice systems- England & Wales, Scotland & Northern Ireland. Young adult approaches operate in each jurisdiction, though reference in this paper is to the English and Welsh system.

making patterns, including offending (Steinberg *et al*, 2015). This research has given light to other arguments in favour of changing the way the justice system treats young adults. Firstly, beginning adult justice at age 18 - as in most jurisdictions - is problematic given 'maturity' does not necessarily match chronological age: this 'cliff edge' is unhelpful in much criminal law decision-making (Bryan-Hancock & Casey, 2011). Secondly, understanding of criminal legal processes amongst young adults is limited (Kwok-Yin Cheng *et al*, 2018) and, finally, adult justice systems based on deterrence and retribution frameworks are unsuitable for young adults who are closer developmentally to children than they are to adults (Loebel & Farrington, 2012). In respect to this evidence, a growing body of academic and policy and practice commentary has called for young adults to be treated as a distinct group within the justice system and for service responses attuned to this developmental life-course stage (Woodward & Lynch, 2021; H.M. Government, 2016, 2018).

This paper is located within the range of policy and practice emerging on young adults in the justice system. It draws on findings from a two-year evaluation of a specialist young adult probation 'Hub' set up in Newham, East London in 2021² (see final report Phillips *et al*, 2024). The Hub was established as a co-located, multi-agency partnership involving probation staff working alongside and in the same space as externally commissioned services, such as mentoring and coaching, speech and language therapy, clinical psychology, substance use, housing, education, training and employment (ETE) among others. A key objective of the Hub was that by linking young adults on probation into a set of support services most closely aligned to the difficulties they face, disruption to further offending could be achieved. The Hub mirrors other 'whole systems approaches' that have grown as a style of service delivery, such as the network of 'women's centres' first established in Greater Manchester in 2014 (Kinsella *et al*, 2018). These support women from marginalised backgrounds whose precarity overlaps with offending by assessing needs at first contact and providing multi-agency support throughout the justice system journey. An evaluation of the Manchester centre found lower than the national average rates of re-offending among women supported by the project (Kinsella *et al*, 2018: 8).

The aim of this article is to present an analysis of the ways in which the co-located, multi-agency Hub model facilitated productivity and beneficial outcomes for young adults and generated high levels of staff satisfaction. The enhanced and diverse range of resources available, the way deeper levels of trust could be established, and how young adults in turn attributed their own gains and hopes for the future to this bespoke service, were unique features. The findings intersect with a conceptual framework that draws on 'procedural justice theory' (Tyler, 1990) and the interconnected themes of building trust and instilling hope. These were present in the way young adults described the Hub's work, the relational and practical nature of the Hub approach and the vocational and employment focus of the service. A central argument is that the way the Hub operated influenced service user engagement in positive directions and impacted sentence compliance. Ultimately, the transformation staff observed among young adults came from the overlapping dynamics of crafting a responsive, co-located service that utilised specialist therapeutic provision and foregrounded a future-focused style of practice. The young adult Hub represents an example of how to strengthen probation practice for this age group as called for in different policy documents and by interested stakeholders and academics (H.M. Inspectorate of Probation, 2024; Ministry of Justice & HMPPS, 2022; Judd & Lewis, 2015) and is a template for a promising way forward.

² The Hub was funded by His Majesty's Treasury's (HMT) Shared Outcomes fund for three years; one year of mobilisation and two years of delivery. An additional year's funding was secured in March 2023 via partnership between the Mayor for London's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), the Probation Service, Barrow Cadbury Trust and Ministry of Justice. Funding for the Hub continued under MOPAC (2024) to March 2026.

Procedural justice theory and probation

Procedural justice theory has been extensively applied by researchers across the different criminal justice domains of policing, the courts, prisons and probation contributing to an evidence base that demonstrates practice based on fair and respectful treatment is associated with legitimacy and compliance. Initially developed by Tyler (1990) as an explanation of ‘why people obey the law’, Tyler showed when processes and procedures are perceived as fair, compliance with the rules is more likely, even if the outcome or the penalty might not be agreed with. Central to perceptions of fairness is professional practice underpinned by a sense of ‘respect’, ‘voice’, ‘neutrality’ and ‘trust’. In presenting his theory, Tyler contrasted ‘instrumental and normative perspectives’ on compliance and why people obey the law. To him, the instrumental perspective saw such behaviour as rooted in deterrence theory; people ‘respond to changes in the tangible, immediate incentives and penalties associated with following the law’ (Tyler, 1990: 3). The normative perspective, meanwhile, views people as concerned with ‘aspects of their *experience*’ [author emphasis] within processes that include ‘neutrality, lack of bias, honesty, efforts to be fair, politeness, and respect for citizens’ rights’ (Tyler, 1990: 7). Tyler highlighted, these factors are conceptually different from the instrumental perspective and importantly ‘the normative perspective matters’:

People obey the law because they react to their experiences by evaluating their justice or injustice...such as whether they have had a chance to state their case and be treated with respect and dignity (Tyler, 1990:178).

Indeed, Tyler’s theory has been applied and tested across a range of quantitative, mainly US-based studies and there is a limited but growing body of literature on procedural justice in probation that draws on the normative perspective and the four tenets of ‘respect’, ‘voice’, ‘neutrality’ and ‘trust’ (Alward, 2024; van Hall *et al*, 2024; Williams & Schaefer, 2022; Fitzalan Howard *et al*, 2023). Some quantitatively measure and align procedural justice with order compliance in a similar way to Tyler’s original Chicago study (van Hall *et al*, 2024) whilst others apply the principles of ‘procedural fairness’ to provide insights into probation and correctional officers’ interactions with clients. These demonstrate professional practice that is person-centred, ‘relational’ and supportive produces outcomes of more favourable user engagement.

For example, Van Hall *et al*’s research (2024) with a sample of people under penal supervision in the Netherlands found meaningful support and relational practice generated higher levels of satisfaction and compliance. Plus, it was associated with a greater obligation to obey the law and lower odds of re-offending. Practice underpinned by a relational approach is central to procedurally just probation work and is seen by some to play an important role in improving compliance:

‘research has found that when individuals on probation report a strong and quality officer relationship predicated on mutual trust, caring and fairness clients are more likely to follow the conditions of their supervision often leading to fewer arrests’ (Alward, 2024: 1).

Alward’s (2024: 8) study - in a single county level probation agency in the United States - tested Tyler’s model through a survey of people on probation (n=185). He found when clients feel they are treated in accordance with procedural justice, they are significantly more likely to believe in the legitimacy of their supervision officers and that such efforts may lead to more successful supervision outcomes, including increased legal compliance.

Similarly, Williams and Schaefer (2024) interviewed 53 ‘probationers and parolees’ within a ‘community corrections’ model in Australia. They found procedural justice elements important to the way interactions with a ‘supervising officer’ and attitudes towards their ‘corrections order’ were formed. Procedural justice was not the direct focus of the evaluation research, but thematic analysis of interview data found participants frequently described procedural justice elements of respect, voice, neutrality and trustworthiness in relation to their supervision experience. From the findings Williams and Schaefer gave examples of best practice, such as within the pillar of ‘respect’ interactions should be courteous and avoid ‘labelling’, under ‘voice’ staff should listen and try to ‘sincerely hear what their supervisees are saying’, ‘neutrality’ called for probation officers to be consistent, measured and non-judgemental and ‘trust’ based interactions should be meaningful and focus on emotional support, behaviour change and skills development. They urged further research to demonstrate how these guiding elements enhance community corrections practice and ‘increase probationer engagement and subsequent compliance’ (Williams & Schaefer, 2024: 186).

In England and Wales, Fitzalan Howard *et al* (2023: 1) examined procedural justice perceptions among people on probation. Through analysis of the ‘Your Voice Matters’ satisfaction survey (n=18,291) they identified positive associations between person-centred, relational practice, such as a greater involvement in the sentence planning process, receiving support and a focus on ‘future orientation’. The two features that contributed most to more positive procedural justice perceptions were practice that took a ‘future orientation’ and that focused on ‘things that matter’ (*ibid.*: 1). Indeed, procedural justice has become an important feature of probation in England and Wales, with guidance on embedding the principles of respect, voice, neutrality and trust into professional practice and service delivery (H.M. Inspectorate of Probation, 2020).

There is a growing albeit small body of knowledge on what procedurally just probation should entail, as well as an increasing body of evidence on the link between perceptions of procedural justice and compliance. However, there is a lack of evidence on how to generate procedural justice with young adults on probation despite the longstanding arguments about the importance of responding to this age group in meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways and the over-representation of this age group in the criminal justice system (Ministry of Justice, 2025)³.

Hope in probation

The concept of ‘hope’ is also central to our study findings. This emerged as a key construct within staff and young adult narratives. The concept of hope has previously been applied in probation and community supervision research, typically in understandings of ‘desistance’ from offending (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; McNeill, 2006), but also on how hope is understood by people on probation and probation practitioners (Phillips *et al*, 2025). A significant body of research from psychology and criminology shows hope has the power to mobilise the future orientation of people who have offended. Snyder *et al*’s (2000) influential ‘hope theory’ sees hope as a cognitive process whereby the process of setting goals is motivational and serves to increase peoples’ chances of rehabilitation and desistance. Importantly, research has shown practitioners can be a source of hope. Nugent & Schinkel (2016) applied the concept of ‘hope’ in their research exploring desistance journeys with men on licence after prison and young people in the transition to adulthood. They referred to ‘criminal justice social workers’ -the equivalent of probation practitioners in the Scottish context -as a source of ‘hope’. Although the way

³ A Freedom of Information request reported 38,477 18-25-year-olds were on probation in England & Wales at 31 December 2023 representing 16% of the total (Ministry of Justice, 2025). The 2021 census showed 8.3% of the population of England & Wales in the 18-to-24-year age group (Office for National Statistics, 2023), thus illustrating young adult age disproportionality.

probation is delivered can also ‘drown out’ such hopes if the pendulum swings too far towards risk-focused models of practice. Put simply, Phillips *et al* (2025b) found practice which is ‘myopic’ (Phillips, 2016) in nature and emphasises short-term technical compliance over supporting to develop what Seeds (2022) calls ‘deep hopes’ has the potential to be counterproductive. This paper can be tied into the Hope research study. The Hub did not encourage engagement and formal compliance in this way – it did it by integrating participatory approaches and flexibility within styles of responsive practice. This created the conditions for building trust that in turn generated the foundations for envisioning hope and led to more substantive forms of compliance.

This article brings the concepts of procedural justice and hope together to make an intervention in several ways. Firstly, the article advances knowledge on the way young adults experience probation in a specialist Hub. Secondly, it develops an understanding of procedural justice and what is known about how trust and hope is built in the context of probation work and specifically with young adults.

The Newham Probation Hub

The Newham Hub was set up to include all 18-to 25-year-olds on the mainstream adult caseload plus 17.5-year-olds turning 18 within their sentence order. Official protocol states this age can be transitioned to adult probation if suitable for that individual person (HMPPS & YJB, 2021).

The Hub’s physical location was a separate designated space within the Newham adult probation building with its own door entrance marking it as a discrete service. The open plan layout with brightly coloured sofas, soft furnishings, wall art, a mini library and a foodbank was designed to encourage engagement with the service and specialist support on offer. Young women’s appointments were held at a differently located partner project based on recognition women in the justice system typically come from ‘trauma’ experiences with gender-specific support spaces needed (Ministry of Justice & HMPPS, 2024).

A set of young adult principles rooted in understandings of ‘developing maturity’, neurodiversity, and trauma-informed and strength-based practice were central to the Hub’s operation from the start. Probation staff were recruited to the team for their stated interests in working with young adults. The team comprised ten staff at the level of professionally qualified ‘probation officer’ with expertise in managing complex and high-level ‘risk’ cases, such as serious violence and ‘gang affiliation’. ‘Probation service officers’ managed caseloads of people in lower ‘risk’ categories and a ‘senior probation officer’ held overall oversight and responsibility for the Hub. A dedicated team of case administrators (n=3) supported operational systems, such as attendance monitoring, staffing cover and sending formal sentence order communications to young adults.

Probation held overall management of the caseload. On initial allocation a risk-assessment and sentence plan with input by young adults was formulated and referrals made into the co-located support services (*i.e.* mentoring and coaching, clinical psychology *etc.*) depending on need. Young adults were serving the range of community-based sentences from ‘community order’, suspended sentence order (SSO) and license after prison. These spanned different lengths with most on an 18-month to two-year community order. Young adults were mandated to comply, attend on time and engage with the order with the potential for breach decisions if failing to comply. One way the Hub sought to respond to the needs of young adults was to grant staff a degree of flexibility and latitude to develop their professional practice and carry a sense of empowerment to work differently. The pre-breach interview embedded into Hub practice from the start formed part of this, with objectives of helping to engage young adults with extra opportunities to demonstrate compliance and avoid enforcement action where possible.

Data and method

The data analysed in this paper were generated via a process evaluation carried out by a team of researchers. The evaluation used a qualitative research design of one-to-one semi-structured interviews with 60 staff from across probation and commissioned partner services⁴ (see Figure 1.) and 35 young adults under supervision (see Figure 2.).

Table 1: Number of probation staff and external partners interviewed across three phases of data collection

Staff interviews	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Total interview number
Probation Practitioners	11	7	9	27
Commissioned External Partners	19	20	20	59
Leaders and managers	5	1	3	9
Total	35	28	32	95**

**The figure of 95 staff denotes total number of interviews. The number 60 cited in text is the different staff members interviewed over the three phases.

Performance data gathered alongside the evaluation recorded between 162 and 248 young adults on the caseload on any given month (see final report Phillips *et al*, 2024). Probation caseload volume correlates to geographical area and the population size of a Probation Delivery Unit (PDU)⁵, as well as crime prevalence and policing activity in a locality. Crime causation is a nuanced and complex issue with a lack of research that adequately examines the impact of poverty on crime (Henham, 2018). In 2022, Newham ranked second highest in London for crime (Newham Community Safety Partnership, 2025) and recorded high levels of social and economic deprivation⁶.

Qualitative interviews for the evaluation were carried out at six-month intervals over three phases (June-July 2022, February-March 2023 & November-December 2023). This captured implementation of the Hub overtime, how the co-located, multi-agency team operated in practice and how this bespoke service was experienced by young adults.

Purposive and convenience sampling was used. All probation and commissioned services staff were invited to take part to represent the spread of expertise and to learn about the role and function of the different commissioned services working in tandem in the Hub. Staff interviews

⁴ This included a representative from the local magistrates' court and a 'prison offender manager' from a London prison transferring young adults from custody to license supervision in the Hub.

⁵ PDUs relate to how the probation service in England and Wales is managed nationally. At the time of writing, 116 PDUs were organised within 12 regions. London had 18 PDUs.

⁶ For 2023/24 of the 33 London boroughs, Newham recorded the second highest proportion of children living in households of 'poverty' (Trust for London Poverty Profile, 2024).

were conducted online or in person at the Hub lasting between 30 minutes and one hour and were transcribed verbatim.

Young adults were recruited from within the Hub while attending mandatory probation appointments. All young adults on the caseload were eligible to participate. An incentive was offered by remunerating the time spent in interview as a day engaged in ‘meaningful activity’; a core element of the ‘Rehabilitation Activity Requirement’ (RAR)⁷ frequently imposed within a community sentence order of younger ages. Not all young adults had a RAR assigned, or they were on license after prison and without conditions of this type. Remuneration could therefore not be offered. Young adult interviews lasted 15 minutes to one hour, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A few declined their consent for audio-recording but agreed to written notetaking. A difficulty with researching people on probation relates to aspects of distrust and perceived stigmatisation and probation populations are defined as a ‘hard-to-reach’ group (Sirdifield *et al*, 2016). It is acknowledged researchers might have gained access to those more likely to engage with the research process and with positive experiences to report. Although, those with serious offence backgrounds and high-risk categorisations also took part. The embedded approach with a researcher present at the Hub throughout the fieldwork phases aided building rapport and assisted recruitment.

Table 2. Young adult participants

Young adult participants	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Total interview number
Young Men	13	12	10	35
Young Women	1	3	4	8
Total	14	15	14	43*

*The figure of 43 young adults denotes total interview numbers. Six were interviewed twice and one three times. Thirty-five individual young adults took part.

Data were analysed by the research team collaboratively using Braun and Clarke’s (2022) six step thematic analysis with further refinement and conceptualisation of themes. In practice, a research team data analysis day at each phase of the evaluation involved reflexive thematic coding drawing on: thoughts generated from the staff and young adult interviews, knowledge from academic literature, and the research questions guiding the evaluation. A set of interconnected themes incorporating procedural justice, building trust and instilling hope were developed from the coding framework. The study received full approval from xx University’s research ethics committee.

The paper now moves to discuss the study findings situating them within the conceptual framework of procedural justice, building trust and instilling hope. A core purpose of the Hub alongside achieving order compliance, was to engage young adults with different parts of the service. This was achieved in ways associated with the co-located Hub design and the model of shared delivery (shared ethos), the relational and practical (*i.e.* employment focused) way staff interacted with young adults and the age-specific focus. All of this helped to establish trust that led young adults to experience the Hub as transformational. The paper’s discussion now seeks to

⁷ A RAR is issued by the courts as a condition that can be imposed within a community order or SSO. A maximum specified number of ‘RAR days’ are set and activities determined through a post-sentence assessment of the person’s needs by a probation practitioner.

identify explanatory mechanisms for how the Hub built trust and engendered hope amongst young adults.

The co-located probation Hub and building trust

One of the core ways in which the Hub managed to build engagement and trust among young adults was through the co-located design that had probation and commissioned services staff working together in a multi-agency team coupled with a shared ethos of goal achievement and young adult success. The co-located design of being in the same building ‘under-the-one-roof’ as partner services meant staff could quickly and easily link young adults into the help and support, they needed (*i.e.* mentoring and coaching, accommodation, training and employment *etc.*). The speed at which referrals could be made was viewed as especially valuable as moments of readiness for young people can be fleeting with opportunities for intervention missed. Further, the straightforward referral process helped garner a sense of sincerity that aided building relationships of trust as this practitioner comments:

rather than say ‘Okay, well I’ll make an appointment for you next week’, there’s a possibility it could have gotten worse, or something else might have superseded their concern at the time, to having that immediacy, somebody who can talk to them and help them right then and there, when they have a problem. I think that makes such a difference. It adds a degree of responsivity. .. You can build up a little sincerity over time because there’s an immediate result. They feel like they’re being listened to. We try to do something to help them. (Probation 14, T3)⁸

Young adults themselves stressed the importance of getting support quickly when issues arise referring to the services being right there and then and readily accessible as a key benefit. The on-site availability of different services and the immediate, same day route into them was central to their positive experiences and continued engagement. So, we can start to see how the Hub model conformed to the trustworthiness principle of procedural justice in that quick referrals enabled the Hub to demonstrate the service’s supportive intentions:

There is a lot of different people walking in and out and a lot of different referrals that they can refer you to, ... different organisations and stuff that help, whether it’s a mentor, whether it’s activities or psychology, or mental health. ... They actually have them onside, so ... you can be seen on the same day within a day or two and it’s that quick. I feel as young people we need to get that support quite quickly, because when you don’t have that as a young person, in your mind, it kind of gets set back a bit. (YP30 T3, female age 21)

Shared young adult and rehabilitation Hub ethos

Another way the Hub was able to build trust among young adults was through the tight team dynamic and shared ethos that developed across the whole staff group. The strong team dynamic was enriched through staff members having explicitly chosen to work with young adults and commitment to the Hub goals of helping them to successfully reach the end of their order exiting probation with fresh aims and new ambitions. This feeling of a “shared purpose” served to strengthen staff collaboration and the Hub’s appeal to young adults:

There is a sense of shared purpose. ... relationship-wise, everyone really works well and we’re looking at ...the welfare of that young person and see what’s best for

⁸ Each participant is identified using an anonymous code which denotes their role in the Hub. YP means young person. T1, T2 and T3 denote the phase of data collection.

them. So, I think we've got that really nice environment here. (External partner 4, T2)

Further, the common starting point of working within a tailored young adult service reinforced the rehabilitation and desistance-oriented values of the Hub and contributed to levels of probation staff job satisfaction. This was in the way the Hub enabled probation staff to deliver rehabilitative and desistance practices that aligned with their established values:

...I like the idea of working with people who aren't too entrenched in the criminal justice system where there is a bit more of chance to hopefully get them out..... Then coupled with the lack of maturity, I feel like they need to be given a bit more of a holistic practice, a trauma-informed practice...from what I've seen with the success stories that we've had so far, I think that it's practitioners that actually genuinely care, and this kind of wraparound multi-agency approach in the Hub. (Probation 20, T3)

This -we suggest - sent a message to young adults on the caseload the service was, above all else, about supporting them and facilitating behaviour change processes, which existing research shows can result in both more legitimacy and better compliance (Alward, 2024).

The Hub as a relational and practical service and 'substantive compliance'

The relational and practical way of working that came about through the Hub's co-located design and shared values was a fundamental component in building trust and a key mechanism in shaping young adult engagement. Young adults reported the Hub to be a welcoming place, with friendly staff who spoke to them "normally" and looked past their offence with appointments referred to as a "mini therapy session". Some contrasted the pro-social and "nice" way they were spoken to with earlier experiences in adult probation, saying the "just come check in and go again", or the "sign in and sign out" style in the adult service was unhelpful. They found the individual attention that focused on what they were going through, the emotional and mental state they were in and what they were looking to achieve, more conducive to their engagement. The comments by this young woman highlight her attraction to the Hub's physical space and the trust she was able to confer through the relational and practical style of interactions with Hub probation officers.

She is a really good probation officer and I just like the way that they've set things out for young people ... even these bean bags for example, like people can come here, they can relax, they can do like what they need to be doing to help with their sentence, basically ... you can relax, do your papers, whatever you need to be doing, if that makes sense. So yeah, I think that here is very nice for people. (YP35 T3, female age 24)

These comments and reflections can be interpreted as perceptions of procedural justice in a similar way to that reported by Alward (2024). The respectful relations as articulated by the young adults can be argued as having a bearing on order compliance, both in terms of 'formal compliance' and a more 'substantive' form of engagement (Robinson & McNeill, 2008). This young man's comments on the nature of the relationship with his mentor can be connected to the sense of respect and 'neutrality' he feels through it. It relates to the style of 'therapeutic alliance' and bond forming written about by scholars (Kennealy *et al*, 2012) studying the positive relationships and interactions with probation that affect order compliance and lead to good outcomes:

...he is always there if I need someone to call ... he treats me as if nothing really happened. Of course, we do talk about my case, we do talk about my arrest, but he looks past that and he just sees me as a person, instead of me as a criminal...(YP31 T3, male age 20)

Robinson and McNeill's (2008) explanation of what compliance in probation means provides for a more qualitative and dynamic account of the degrees and dimensions of compliance. Drawing on Bottoms' (2001) earlier definitions which differentiates 'short-term requirement compliance' - that which occurs while a person is serving their order - from 'longer-term legal compliance', which is desistance from crime into the future, Robinson and McNeill (2008: 434) sensitised and deepened understandings of compliance in probation. They make a distinction between the different forms of compliance people demonstrate while serving an order termed 'formal compliance' and 'substantive compliance'. Formal compliance is behaviour that technically meets the minimum specified requirements of an order, such as attending appointments and placements at designated times. Substantive compliance on the other hand, refers to the active engagement and co-operation of the person in the way they show a 'genuine desire to tackle his or her problems' and 'co-operate in a way that goes beyond obedience to rules'. They point out understanding the mechanisms that underpin levels and dimensions of compliance and the processes and interactions that bring about shifts between them is needed. Researchers have built on Robinson and McNeill's paradigm advancing ways of understanding substantive compliance and features of probation practice that encourage a person's fuller engagement. Ugwudike & Phillips, (2020: 877) for instance, argue for more participatory forms of supervision in community justice settings that are able to 'harness service users strengths and capabilities as 'active agents' should be attempted'. Similarly, McCulloch (2015: 40) highlighted the 'relevance of a more co-productive justice pursuit that recognises and supports the participation, potential and progression of those required to comply'.

Applying this paradigm to our analysis, and we can see that the way young adults engaged with the Hub amounted to a more substantive form of compliance. They wanted to attend and engage because they saw the Hub as having important benefits and something unique to offer them. For most, the opportunities offered through the range of specialist support services was something they had never previously been exposed to.

Partner services in a probation bridging role

Aligned to these points is that for young people to truly benefit from specialist provision, it was important to try out new forms of support. Yet staff commented on how probation can be perceived as tied to the police with associations of mistrust that impacts engagement. The presence of partner services in the Hub and the bridging role they performed was central to closing this gap. The comment by this probation practitioner illustrates how young adults in the Hub forged relationships of trust with partner services that they would not with probation:

Young people open up more with some of the partners than they do to their probation officer, as they are mindful of what they say, lack a degree of trust... With the partnerships I think they're almost happy to drop their guard a bit more, it seems non-threatening, "so they've got a different level of engagement", with the partners they give a different level of information, a different level of insight. This is a key benefit of the Hub from the perspective of probation. (Probation 14, T3)

Abrams *et al*, (2019: 279) highlighted the bridging role in their research examining the interface between voluntary and statutory youth justice services within prison and probation contexts. They noted the ideological differences between services suggesting voluntary organisations can

more easily form connections due to their distance from law enforcement that enables a ‘piece of the outside world [to be brought] into the correctional facilities they serve’.

The bridging role and the way trust was established in the Hub is illustrated in the following scenario recounted by one of the ‘therapeutic mentors’. He worked intensively with this young man over his two-year license supervision. He commented on the trust the young man developed in him over time and the feeling of having someone “on his side” enabled him to open-up, ask for the help he needed and focus on progressing forward:

For me this was one of the best turning points for him...being around us he was able to expand his mind and think that he could do anything,... it just kind of opened up for him’ (External partner 38, T3)

The young man himself reflected on his time at the Hub as in many ways helping to shape a new sense of self and identity:

from when I was in prison and on probation...it’s been like moulding. Moulding my mentality... (YP25 T3, male age 22)

At the time of the interview, he was two weeks away from completing his sentence and attributed his arrival at that endpoint to the work of the Hub:

.. it’s been going good. Good. They’ve been very helpful here.I’ve been on licence for two years. ... I’ve had something hanging over my head since I was 16 And obviously I’m 22 now....So, December comes; that’s me. (YP25 T3, male age 22)

These comments correspond directly with what Alward (2024: 8) notes about procedural justice in probation and the way experiencing fair procedures and respectful treatment can ‘convey or even promote a sense of value and overall self-worth’ among clients. Moreover, it illustrates how positive relationships between young adults and probation were also strengthened within this multi-agency partnership model and helped to align the dual rehabilitative ‘care’ and statutory ‘control’ risk-management role of probation.

Flexibility within probation supervision

A related theme within the bridging role partner services could perform, was how it could aid flexibility within probation supervision and decision-making. Instances were typically given in the context of attendance compliance and breach decisions. Despite the supportive, non-judgemental, holistic work going on the Hub, cases of breach and recall arose. Between November 2021 and August 2023, breaches initiated in the Hub monthly ranged from zero to 14⁹. Each month several were withdrawn indicating processes of dialogue, flexibility and professional discretion in certain cases. There are people under probation supervision who for different reasons fall short of mandated attendance and order requirements (Weaver *et al*, 2021). Aligned to formal process and procedure these generate breach proceedings. In the case of the Hub, partner services could assist. One partner recalled his role in a three-way meeting between a young adult and a probation officer that was especially important because the issue had arisen towards the end of his order after a long and clear record of compliance. The partner was able to

⁹ Data on breaches were drawn from a performance monitoring system and are not research data: thus, care should be taken in drawing inferences from them.

vouch for him through the ‘bonding’ and dependability forged within their one-to-one support relationship.

...there was a miscommunication between him, his probation officer and another professional which upset him. And it was right at the end of his probation. ...he was very good at attending. So, I'm surprised he didn't show up. I suggested that I could sit in and join the meeting between three of them,I didn't have to do any particular mediating. I think it was just having that person there for him and he was able to go through what we talked about ... and he was able to do that quite calmly and the issue was resolved. (External partner 19, T2)

For staff, inter-personal relationships involving points of conflict - such as breach decisions in probation - incur elements of tension and required skill and expertise from staff to manage and restore strained relationships. Within the Hub multi-agency partnership working, it appeared strained relationships were more easily repairable with partners (*i.e.* a mentor or a speech and language specialist *etc.*) acting as a bridge. Moreover, and importantly, it contributed to the way positive relationships between young adults and probation could be sustained over time that helped probation guide young adults to order completion.

In turn, this meant that a fuller contribution towards young adult achievements and end goals could be made by probation staff giving them a valued sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, as this probation officer articulates:

It feels wonderful. I feel like I've finished as well with them. It feels like a finishing for both of us. And because she has done so well and she had so many professionals involved and she was very proactive as well, ‘I want to do this, I want to do that’ and she wanted to really address a lot of her issues too, so she worked with wellbeing, and art therapy. ... but generally she did really, really well. So just to see her make a positive change. Yeah, amazing. (Probation 19, T3)

What is seen in the comment above can be understood as procedurally just experiences for staff. On top of young adults receiving a style of probation practice that embedded elements of respect, voice, neutrality and trust, probation staff were also able to work in an environment that enabled them to practise in ways that aligned with the core probation values of rehabilitation that in some ways evoked a return to the earlier “advise, assist and befriend” traditions of the service. The ‘drift’ away from probation’s traditional social work values has been well documented (Raynor and Vanstone 2016: 1135) but it seemed to us that the Hub was felt by probation staff as more akin to the social work-oriented approach the service traditionally occupied. Staff had access to enhanced resources through the co-located, multi-agency approach that when combined with professional probation practice reinforced support to young adults and aided service goals of reducing offending and crime desistance.

Transformations and instilling hope

These points about trust and the relational and practical methods emanating from the co-located, partnership approach can be linked to the progress, and transformation staff were seeing. Staff spoke at length about the achievements of young adults moving on from offending, the jobs they were getting, the courses they were attending, and the family relationships they were re-establishing. In this way, the Hub was viewed almost unanimously as transformational:

I think the young people that have come through, have left – they are way better off, way better off than when they first came. Young people who...have hope, didn’t even know

what hope was. Just seeing over time their development, seeing their potential being unlocked. It's transformational. The Hub is transformational. (External Partner 3, T3)

The sentiment of the Hub as transformational was confirmed by young adults. Several reflected on the interpersonal closeness and positive relationships they had with Hub staff that in turn stimulated their engagement with the vocational opportunities and forms of therapeutic and well-being support available. It highlights the importance for young adults to see their own potential and how hope is a powerful mechanism for change (Snyder *et al*, 2000).

...I was fresh out of prison and with no job, so he was mentioning a course that we could do, railway, and it lasts five weeks and we will go college. ..., I went to college, I never been to college in my life, so I went to college for the first time ever, finished it and the guy just helped me through it. .. Probation basically helped me get a job. (YP25 T2, male age 21¹⁰)

Staff frequently referred to the transformation among young adults as remarkable given the social disadvantage most had come from. Several studies highlight the association between adverse childhood experiences and offending pathways (Tetsa *et al*, 2018) plus the impact of poverty on crime (Henham, 2018). The young adult Hub sample came from multiple layers of disadvantage, with school exclusion histories, experiences of 'state' care, young carer responsibilities, mental ill-health, alongside vanished formative years in prison. As this mentor comments even more intensive support and "time" is needed to foster the socio-emotional ties that cement relationships of trust, confidence and hope:

It takes time for young people who haven't had the same benefits, the positive inputs, the positive attachments, the community. If they haven't had that, they need time and time isn't two years, it's three years, for long lasting change. (External Partner 3, T3)

So, we can see how the co-located Hub, with its multi-agency team working and shared ethos of support and future-focused goals, helped arm young adults with a sense of personal ambition. This led them to judge the Hub as a service they wanted to engage with and that produced tangible benefits.

Generating hope through focusing on employment

The points about hope and the power it has to motivate was present in young adult narratives, especially when speaking about their futures and the work and careers they imagined for themselves. They wanted to work and gain qualifications but were held back by the barriers a criminal conviction puts in place. Fostering hope was core to the function of the employability service and they did it through encouraging young adults to seize work and training opportunities available.

Several young adults were being helped by the employment service in job searching, formulating their *curriculum vitae* and learning interview techniques. Some had taken up training in rail track maintenance work, in the construction industry and/or were exploring routes into self-employment. The comment by this young man shows the hope he carries for his work future and the valued support given to him by the employability service. It is an example of the way participatory and co-production strategies built a more substantive form of compliance in the Hub (Ugwudike & Phillips, 2020).

¹⁰ The previous reference to this young man as age 22 indicates his older age between the T2 and T3 interview.

At the minute I don't have a job, but I am looking for jobs..... They've [the employment service] found me a couple of job offers, but because of my court case and everything, I have restrictions on where I can work, so it's a bit hard for me to find jobs, even though I'm willing to work and I'm willing to get into any industry at the minute, even if it's retail or games design ... I am just searching and searching for jobs. (YP31 T3, male age 20)

Similarly, the aspiration and hope facilitated by encouraging young adults to seize the work and training opportunities available and look positively to the future and a career in the longer-term comes through in this man's comment:

I'm trying to get into digital marketing. I've gone for a few interviews and been turned down, but I want an apprenticeship so I can get a qualification. ...I want to be a digital marketer ... that's what I want to do. (YP25 T3, male age 22)

The Target Operating Model for the probation service in England and Wales (HMPPS, 2021: 62) set out what probation practice should aim to achieve within the ethos of 'assess, protect and change'. One way is through building trusting relationships to 'promote compliance, increase hope and sustain motivation'. Thus, it was possible to see in the work executed at the Hub that it was proactively applying new principles of evidence-based practice in relation to achieving behaviour change and crime desistance.

It is not possible to appraise the extent to which young adults were successful in securing employment without further follow-up. Nonetheless, it was evident they carried strong emotions of hope and being believed in and felt equipped to be stepping out and moving forward with a degree of confidence. It highlights the empowering impact of building hope and the reassurance it gives as articulated by this young man as he exited probation after months of supervision in the Hub:

I feel free, proud, ... it's just like my mind is free now, through the help of them ... Yes, I'm just proud, proud, ... and it's just made me want more for myself in the future, ..these guy's in the Hub have given me a reassurance that I haven't really seen ..., they've seen potential in myself that I haven't seen and they've made me see that. (YP19 T2, male age 24)

The concept of hope was therefore important to this study's findings. When tied together with the Hub as a practical and relational service with a rehabilitation-oriented focus embedded within its professional ethos and as experienced by the young adults, it strengthens claims that what was seen at the Hub was evidence of procedural justice in young adult probation. Probation practice that cultivates a degree of self-confidence and self-affirmation in a cohort of young adults as they exit probation in the way the Hub did are important outcomes to capture.

'Developing maturity' and compliance

Another example of the relational and practical support young adults found beneficial was the Hub's emphasis on responding to this developmental life-course phase. Several young adults commented on the importance of probation being attuned to young age in the way of the Hub. They recognised the Hub as a service reflective of their developing maturity, the way perspective and sources of influence (*e.g.* peers) are changing rapidly at this time and how understandings of criminal legal processes are difficult especially when encountering the justice system for the first time. This young man's comments contrast the approach of the Hub with the adult probation services he had earlier experienced and how the young adult focus helped reduce his anxiety

surrounding probation. It provides evidence of the significance this can have for service user engagement and a more substantive form of order compliance:

... it's really important for me to have this because ...in [location] they treated me like a fully-fledged adult and it wasn't really helping me. It gave me more anxiety, and it made me kind of feel a bit uneasy going to probation in [location], but as I'm here now I find it really easy to come here, as I know I will be treated for who I am, like my age group,So yeah, I feel like the Hub for me personally is amazing. (YP31 T3, male age 20)

Likewise, this young woman highlights specific features of Hub practice relating to young age that were important to her. For example, being helped to understand the “paperwork”, essentially the legal technical detail of her community order. She points out the vital nature of this in the context of probation supervision as clear and comprehensible communication is critical for understanding the gravity of a sentence order and the mandatory compliance requirements with it.

Over there [adult probation]... if you're new to probation, ... a lot of the paperwork and things you don't really understand. When I came here I just understood everything. I think it's just even the way the probation officers speak, they can explain it in a way that young people understand...

if you're coming to probation and you don't know why you're coming to probation, then every day is just going to drag on you. .. you're going to think to yourself 'Well I don't understand probation, .. why am I going?' and then it might turn in to 'Do you know what? I'm not going' and then you can get into more trouble because you're not understanding why you're here in the first place(YP35 T3, female age 24)

Findings such as these can be understood as evidence of the existence of procedural justice in young adult probation practice that in turn shaped the positive views of young adults' helping them to engage with constituent parts of the Hub service that initiated more substantive forms of compliance.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has analysed key findings from an evaluation of a bespoke young adult probation Hub conceptualising them within a linked theoretical framework of procedural justice, building trust and instilling hope. A dominant finding was how the bespoke, co-located Hub service and the professional practice that flowed from it with probation and partner services working in tandem to deliver rehabilitation-oriented practice, led young adults to experience it as a service they wanted to engage with, that had tangible benefits and helped give them hope for their futures.

The study makes an important contribution to the body of research knowledge on young adults on probation and provides critical understanding for the wider shaping of relevant, responsive and transformative probation practice. The longitudinal design enabled a unique view of how probation staff alongside commissioned partner services were together able to build trusting relationships with young adults over time and the service features that were critical in aiding building trust and instilling hope.

The study did not set out to examine perceptions of procedural justice, but young adult narratives of their Hub justice system experience were underscored by relationships, interactions and opportunities that could be interpreted within the procedural justice principles of respect,

neutrality, voice and trustworthy motives as developed by Tyler (1990). The way trust was built and the different programme interventions young adults were engaging with to find new ways of being and the genuine and enduring effort they were putting into getting to the end of their community sentence can be interpreted as a form of procedurally just probation that had a bearing on sentence compliance. It highlights how young adults experienced a rich engagement with their needs met through a broader constellation of services where probation is one part of the provision. In this multi-agency context, probation emerges as a broker of support while at the same time is the formal manager of the order. For some, the ‘control’ dimensions appear to feel less explicit and more diffused through this partnership approach.

Thus, the main implications from the analysis are threefold. These are that a close examination of the Hub model has enabled the development of knowledge on what procedurally just probation practice for young adults can look like. This is in addition to giving insights into how probation can engage young adults in meaningful ways through a service with easily accessible routes into specialised support, that applies flexibility in decision-making, is attuned to ‘developing maturity’ and that embeds participatory and co-productive styles of vocational and employment support. All of this generated forms of substantive compliance, underpinned by what Dominey (2019) terms ‘thick supervision’ and is likely to have altered the future disposition of young adults.

Secondly, the article has provided a more nuanced look at how the multi-agency partnership approach aided a form of probation practice that is both underpinned by procedural justice and relevant to probation staff as well as people on probation. In having chosen to work in the young adult Hub, the collective focus and shared rehabilitation-oriented ethos enabled staff to deliver practice that aligned with their established values, brought deeper levels of staff satisfaction and made important contributions to goals of reducing re-offending, developing pro-social identities and young adult desistance from crime. Thirdly, the article provides a more nuanced look at how probation can facilitate and instil hope among young adults on probation and the power helping them recognise their own employment potential has for positive future focused direction planning.

Probation has a degree of autonomy in the type and way services are delivered and there are calls for young adult probation to be strengthened across England and Wales (H.M. Inspectorate of Probation, 2024; Ministry of Justice & HMPPS, 2022). The positive experiences of this co-located, multi-agency approach aimed at the young adult age group is an encouraging outcome and is an area for future exploration. Comparisons with other regional areas, cohorts and international contexts would add additional insights. The Hub model offers transferrable learning for others seeking to embed procedurally just practice into young adult supervision and contributes valuable insights with the potential for further and wider development.

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