

A preliminary evaluation of the 'Working with Young Adults' training for Probation Practitioners

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Contents	
Introduction	3
Methodology	3
Findings	3
Aims of the course	3
Joining the course	4
Attendance	4
Content and delivery of the course	5
Delivery issues	6
Impacts of the course	7
Champions	8
Conclusions	9
Recommendations	10

APPENDIX CONTAINING A LITERATURE REVIEW IS PROVIDED SEPARATELY

Introduction

This document reports the findings from a preliminary, small-scale evaluation of a pilot training course called ‘Working with Young Adults’, which is aimed at upskilling practitioners in using the ‘Choices and Changes’ interventions. This is in line with the House of Commons Justice Committee’s (2016) recommendation that there should be a distinct approach to the supervision of young adults in the criminal justice system.

The training was informed by a literature review conducted by Dr Zoe Cross in 2019 (which is attached as an Appendix). This led to the design of a biopsychosocial, evidence-informed training package, aimed at equipping Probation Service practitioners with the skills, confidence and knowledge to be able to best work with, and address the specific needs of, Young Adults (18-24 years of age) who are under probation supervision.

Specifically, this evaluation set out to (a) explore the course organisers’ understanding of the aims of the course, as well as their views about how it had gone in practice and whether it would benefit from any changes; (b) gather attendees’ experiences and views about the course: why they volunteered for it, and what they thought about its content and format; and (c) identify any impact the training had on them in terms of confidence, knowledge, and skills.

Methodology

The main source of data for the study was semi-structured interviews, conducted online via Teams, with people who designed, organised and/or taught on the course and with probation staff who attended it. Unfortunately, it proved very difficult to arrange interviews with the latter, due mainly to high workloads and limited availability. Despite help from the organisers and several follow-up emails, in the end only two of the 13 course attendees made themselves available for interview. Clearly, it cannot be assumed that their views and experiences are representative of the whole group. However, they provided some valuable information and insights which help to give a sense of how the training went and how it was received. The interviews will also act as a useful pilot if the course is run again and a full evaluation is undertaken.

Each interview lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours and was recorded and transcribed. The analysis was undertaken with the help of NVivo software to organise the data and identify key themes. These are described and discussed in the Findings section of this report.

Ethical approval was granted by USW and NRC. Participants were given an Information Sheet and were required to sign a Consent Form, prior to interviews taking place. All data was anonymised, and no individuals are identified in this report.

Findings

Aims of the course

The organisers explained how the idea for the course was conceived and developed:

“In project plan year one we did lots of evaluation and research gathering information and this was one of the ideas that was born out of gathering that information. So, I did focus groups with service users, with young people. The feedback from that, overwhelmingly, was that Probation staff don't really understand. They said, we don't really understand; it's a niche client group and we'd really like to feel more confident in working with their needs. We thought we could respond to this need by identifying Champions and training them specifically in working with young adults.” (Organiser 1)

“Once people signed up, we held a launch event. At the beginning of last summer, when it started, you know, to kind of launch this project and people attended that and they were able I think at that point to say yes, this really interests me or actually no.” (O2)

The main aims of the course can perhaps be best summarised as: (1) to increase participants' knowledge, skills and confidence in working with young adults on Probation; and (2) to designate at least some of the practitioners who completed the course as 'Champions' in the area of working with young people.

Joining the course

Attendance on the course was voluntary and both the attendees we interviewed had jumped at the chance to take part. Both said that they had a strong affinity for working with young people and a consequent desire to improve their knowledge and skills (it was also clear from the interviews that this applied to several of the other attendees). They also had an eye on a possible career path involving specialising in such work:

“I haven't really had any experience with young people, although that was something I was kind of always interested in doing. So, when this kind of pilot came out, it was right up my street. And I think it was just after I qualified, so it fitted in quite nicely, really. The young people were where I was always wanted to work. There's nothing more kind of satisfying than putting somebody back on the right path. (Attendee 1)

“So, I was just beginning my training as a PO and I've always enjoyed like working with youth. I feel most comfortable working with youth. I think it's probably just my background. I just feel like I relate more to youth, so I was confident, but I still thought I just need like, the more obviously the more you can learn the better.” (A2)

Neither of the interviewees said that they had found any difficulty in being accepted as an attendee, nor that they had experienced resistance from their line manager. One reported:

“My manager was obviously always aware that I did want to work with youth. But I just didn't really have the training. So, I wasn't really getting enough experience of working with youth and I just kept mentioning it... Then] my manager said that she was attending these regularly, so put me up forward for it straight away. It was like volunteer. Like put your name forward if anyone was interested.” (A2)

Attendance

Thirteen probation officers joined the course. However, attendance was variable and fell significantly in the summer months when staff leave had an effect, leading to a number of sessions being cancelled or postponed. Generally speaking, failure to attend was said to be due to pressure of work or conflicting commitments, rather than any lack of interest or dislike of the course. This applied to both our interviewees, who had clearly been keen to attend. They commented:

“I've attended quite a few. Throughout the summer a lot got rescheduled. I know a lot of people were off in the summer or they would contradict with our other kinds of training events.” (A1)

“I'd say I've been to a good few; 8 maybe. They cancelled a few. Some of them got cancelled or rearranged. Sometimes they would get rearranged if people couldn't make it. If it was rearranged and it was a day I wasn't working or whatever, yeah, I've missed. But on the on the whole, they just run even if it was a smaller event. I believe they were recorded.” (A2)

One of the organisers added:

“In holiday periods, we dropped down to maybe where we never ran a session if there were less than three people attending. We'd postpone that session until there's more people. There were moments where we struggled with quite low attendance and there had to be some work to generate the interest. It's not a lack of interest that prevented attendance. It's more to do with people's time and being able to commit to it.” (O1)

When people missed sessions, they were encouraged to read material on which the course was based, especially the ‘seven-minute briefings’ (see next section):

“I don't think they do catch up sessions. I think the documents, like the seven-minute briefing, would be sent out too, so we would be able to read that. Any kind of follow up documents that were discussed in the session, they'd be sent out.” (A2)

Content and delivery of the course

Training sessions were held monthly over approximately a one-year period, with a different topic covered each month. The topics included:

- Maturity
- Pre-measures to young adults
- ACEs & young adult men
- Sexual offending & gangs
- Unconscious bias & normalisation
- Guidance on gangs and violent offenders
- County Lines guidance in court; cuckooing.

Several sources influenced the design and content of the course. These included the review of literature by Dr Cross, mentioned earlier, as well as training resources made available from the

national young adult team and policy leads – in particular a series of ‘seven-minute briefings’. For example, one of these was on Care Leavers, addressing the questions: Who are care leavers? What is known about care leavers? How can practitioners best support care leavers? And Resources related to Care Leavers. Other briefings covered professional curiosity; young adult brain; threat to life notice; County Lines; and reducing recall rates for BAME young adults.

The course organisers argued, and both attendees agreed, that the content of the course had been broad and varied and that it had covered useful topics. Their comments included:

“I think the range is excellent. You know, the breadth of what we've found and what was available.” (O1)

“It seemed to be every month was a different subject... The topics were all pretty good.” (A2)

A session identified by one attendee as having been particularly useful was the one on youth violence:

“Youth violence. It was a really good session. I enjoyed that one because I've never worked with the team and it just made me think I'd like to go into that team in the future.” (A2)

However, while agreeing that it had been useful, the other felt that a particular aspect of youth violence - the link between drug dealing and gang violence - had not been sufficiently covered:

“Gangs and the drug dealing and the violent side of it, which hopefully when I do the training now next year, that'll kind of tick that box.” (A1)

A general gap in probation practitioner knowledge around similar kinds of issues was also recognised by one of the organisers, who commented:

“Practitioners always tell me that they don't know enough, or they don't feel confident enough in addressing and working with knife crime. For instance, and other weapons [used by] gangs.” (O1)

Delivery issues

The monthly online sessions lasted around 30 minutes and were led by one of the course organisers. The decision to keep them short was explained by one of them:

“The practice then was very different and very pressured and we were also working in a period of high vacancies and you know reduced resources. So, we came up with a 30-minute action learning sets so that the commitment. Chose 30 minutes because we were working in COVID.” (O1)

The sessions were also designed to be interactive, with brief inputs from whoever was leading the session followed by general discussion or a question and answer session. The same organiser felt that this had worked fairly well, but had been hampered to some extent by the online technology and would have been more effective ‘in person’:

“A lot of the training sessions focus on a 7-minute briefing. 10 minutes of your time is a briefing and then the 20 minutes discussion. And that works quite well.

They were done on Teams. If this was to go in a room, I think it would generate more discussion. It might be quite tight in 30 minutes. I'd say it works quite well on Teams, but the downside of Teams is you really have got to facilitate. People kept coming into the conversation.” (O1)

The attendees we interviewed broadly agreed with this assessment. For example:

“The seven-minute briefings - they work and seem to be a snapshot of information. You'd get everything you need, and it was a good like discussion starter. I think everyone found them helpful and enjoyable. More so because I enjoyed the subject. I think maybe if you didn't enjoy the subject, you'd be like, why am I here kind of thing. At the end, they'd send things on Teams like extra work, if you wanted to read it or links. It was interactive, especially because they were all over Teams as well. Obviously, none of them have been face to face, so I think it's quite hard. But they were interactive. Meeting monthly and discussing.” (A2)

A total of four guest speakers also delivered a session each on a specialist topic. These included a session on the Trauma Recovery Model in the context of young adults, presented by Jonny Matthew, as well as presentations by members of the Violence Prevention Unit, the Youth Offending Service, and St Giles Wise (on young adult personal wellbeing). The guest speakers were all greatly appreciated, and these sessions were said to have been particularly informative due to the degree of expert knowledge and hands-on experience they had:

“I think the external training [i.e. external speakers] is always better and I don't mean that because our kind of training is not great, but the seven-minute briefings we kind of already have access to that information. External training is quite nice, having like guest speakers come and they speak about things that we're not aware of or haven't already been discussed.” (A1)

Overall, the impression we received from the interviews was that the course had started out extremely well, with a successful format, good attendance, lively inclusive discussions and some particularly good guest speakers. However, when it got into the summer months, for a variety of reasons fewer people were able to attend, some sessions were cancelled or postponed, the quality of the content and discussions dipped somewhat, and there were no guest speakers. One attendee summed it up as follows:

“[The sessions became] really short and just going through kind of the seven-minute briefings and having a quick discussion whereas, I think in the beginning they were a lot more involved and we had kinds of external people coming to speak to us and as it's gone on, I think it's just gone a little bit less and less.” (A1)

Impacts of the course

Interviewees were asked what benefits they had got out of the course. In terms of subjects about which they had gained most new knowledge, the topic which stood out was youth/gang violence - although, as noted earlier, this (or closely related topics) was also identified as something which the attendees would have liked to learn more about. More generally, it was felt that they had learned something useful about a wide range of subjects, though - perhaps inevitably, given the limited amount of time – some of it was seen as lacking in depth:

“They've scratched the surface of almost every area. I simply think that there could be far more in depth.” (O1)

When asked what could be done about this, typical replies were:

“Some in-depth training... Additional training would be great because I think if someone was to come in one day and say, you know, I'm in this gang, I've had enough and panicking, you'd still feel a bit on the back foot with what you actually could do there and then.” (A1)

“Refreshers and things, I suppose.” (A2)

As well as increases in knowledge, the attendees mentioned benefits in terms of increased confidence, both in their actual practice and in their willingness to discuss practice issues with more senior colleagues:

“I think it's given me a bit more confidence to do the one-to-one work... I have the confidence to speak to other people that are possibly doing the work or got like the same interest to know I'm on the same track. I probably wouldn't have done it in the team where I'm working because there are a lot of officers that probably, not set in their ways, but don't like really trying new things.” (A2)

“I think it should give me confidence to just ask and know who to ask.” (A1)

A third important impact of the course was actual or potential effects on attendees' future careers. The most striking of this was that one of them had already been taken on by a Youth Offending Team on a part-time basis, as a direct result of attending the course:

“I joined the YOT recently as a result of being on the course. When I graduated, they agreed that I do 2 days in youth offending and two days in probation. So, I'll do the transition.” (A2)

As noted above, both practitioner interviewees also were hoping to attend further training in order to expand their knowledge with a view to eventually working wholly or predominantly with younger people.

Champions

A final expected impact from the course was one of the original aims when it was first designed. This was to designate some of those who completed it as ‘Champions’ in the area of working with young people. This would mean being available, as a person with specialist knowledge on the topic, to help or advise colleagues when they had problems or queries arising from their work with a young person. The course organisers explained the idea as follows:

“At least one Champion per team in the area that we piloted this and that Champion's role firstly would be upskilling them and growing their confidence. But with the view of that then being filtered back to their team and then sharing their learning with the team. If I'm not the Champion and I'm holding a young adult, I know who I go to in my team, who is the expert in my team if you like.” (O1)

“One per team really. So, I guess 12 of them as Champions and have a lead focus on the good practice guidance and materials involved in you know, how to work with young adults in a more effective way and to take the lead and be there for advice for other members of their team who are dealing with young adults as part of their caseload... There's no rules we have with different Champions. In the past,

we tried to articulate what that means. You know, but there's no formal job description change and there's no agreement signed or anything like that to take an extra responsibility" (O2)

However, although one of the practitioner attendees appeared to broadly understand the role, neither of them seemed fully certain whether they had actually become a Champion after completing the course:

"The Champion role is just making themselves aware, or in the different offices knowing who to go to. Be able to hand out things if needed. That type of thing. Just having that somebody to go to, the person trained, knowing how to deal with it...

But becoming a Champion, it's going into a bit of a flat hole. It doesn't really kind of get talked about. I'd say that's more like informal." (A1)

"I'm not sure about being a Champion at the end, to be honest; no one ever really said" (A2)

In short, this plan does not seem to have materialised in a concrete or formal way. The main causes of this, according to one of the practitioners, were practical barriers created by the case allocation system, and perhaps most of all by shortage of time and the pressured nature of daily work in a busy office:

"A Champion needs to be allocated the young adult cases because you can't really put into practice what you're learning, if you don't have the cases, and I think that is really hard when you've got a full caseload and a generic team. The office is just so busy and you don't get kind of any adjustments or reductions, I think you get about an hour and that's it." (A1)

Conclusions

The disappointing response to our attempts to interview practitioners who attended the course (itself largely due to the same problem - pressure of work - mentioned above as a reason for the 'Champions' plan not being implemented as planned) means that we cannot claim to have captured a full range of views about the training course. The interviews we did conduct – with the two people most closely involved in the design, organisation and delivery of the course, as well as two of the 13 attendees – were lengthy, frank and thorough, and produced a rich picture of what occurred and how they experienced it, but it may be that others had different views and experiences. All we have been able to do, therefore, is to present as full a picture as we can based on the available data. As noted earlier, if the course is repeated on a larger scale, our study will be helpful as a pilot for a fuller evaluation.

The main findings of the evaluation, and the conclusions we have reached – all of which have to be treated with caution for the above reason – can be summarised as follows:

- a) The course covered a wide range of topics which attendees said they found useful. Given the short time available (only 30 minutes per month), this inevitably led to superficiality in coverage of some topics. This was ameliorated, however, by the provision of written materials for attendees to read in their own time, as well as inspiring some to look for further training opportunities in the future.

- b) Interviewees liked the fact that sessions were generally interactive, with chances for discussion and exchanges of views. The use of seven minute briefings was said to be a good way of quickly setting up such discussions, although it was mentioned that they were available elsewhere and could be studied independently (suggesting perhaps that their use might be reduced and other sources of information introduced). The sessions most appreciated by attendees were those delivered by external speakers expert on a specific topic.
- c) Training attendance was impacted to some extent throughout the year by other work commitments, but it fell most markedly in the summer months, mainly due to leave.
- d) The attendees said that the training had had an impact on them in three main ways: it had (1) expanded their knowledge about how best to support young adults on Probation; (2) raised their confidence when working with young adults; and (3) opened up more opportunities to work with young adults.
- e) Whilst one of the original aims of the course was to produce practitioner ‘Champions’ in the area of working with young people, the indications were that there was a lack of formality and clarity regarding the role of Champions and the interviewees were uncertain whether or how this aim was being put into practice.

Recommendations

- Training sessions to run outside of the summer months, as the summer period is when staff availability is at its lowest.
- Spread out the guest speakers throughout the duration of the training, rather than front-loading.
- Ensure each training session runs for between 30-45 minutes, consistently.
- Formalise the Champion role:
 - Clearly define the nature and role of a Champion.
 - Afford practitioners dedicated time on their workload, each month, to attend training sessions (prioritise training sessions as a whole course).
 - Work towards accrediting the training course, to afford it more value to practitioners, in terms of their continuing professional development.
 - Ensure Champions have young adults on their caseloads following completion of training.
- Consider offering catch-up sessions, or running each session bi-monthly, to afford practitioners more flexibility in terms of being able to attend regularly.
- Consider running refresher sessions.
- Extend the course topics to cover gangs and drug dealing and ensure the course content remains flexible and fluid, to allow it to respond to the evolving needs of practitioners and the young adults they support.
- Adopt a blended learning approach, with a balance of both online and in-person training sessions, ensuring that regardless of the format of the session, each session is discussion-based and collaborative among attendees.
- Pilot the training over a larger area across Wales.