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Re-imagining Probation in the Community: An Evaluation of 'Grand Avenues'

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

In 2017 HMPPS started to establish a project called Grand Avenues (GA), which was rolled out from October 2021. GA had the remit to test whether successful and sustained rehabilitative outcomes could be achieved in an innovative community focused project, based in the Cardiff wards of Caerau and Ely. The intention was to create a Probation Service team to supervise men on licence, parole or community sentences, in premises situated in the area and to work with other service providers (either commissioned or with whom local links were made). Female offenders were not included, as they were already supervised under the Wales Women's Pathfinder scheme in non-Probation premises elsewhere. Four objectives were identified as a basis for operation:

1. Demonstrate reduced harm and reoffending in adult males
2. Implement a sustainable approach
3. Develop project aims through engagement with local communities
4. Positively impact on the wider community, especially the families and dependents of offenders, with the longer-term aim of reducing intergenerational offending.

HMPPS commissioned the University of South Wales (USW) to conduct a process evaluation of GA. The fieldwork period was from November 2022 to September 2024. Five specific research questions were developed: these are presented and discussed later in this summary. The data gathered was mainly qualitative, obtained through frequent participant observation by the researcher, combined with in-depth interviews with HMPPS staff who had been involved in the preparation and delivery of GA, probation officers and commissioned partners, men on Probation who had received support from GA, and three peer mentors.

Developing the Approach

GA was situated in the Strategic Support and Administration directorate within HMPPS. The directorate's role was to project manage GA (scope, establishment and delivery). It sat outside Probation's operational line, thereby providing greater opportunity for innovation. However, responsibility for Probation practice remained with the Regional Probation Director and head of the Probation Delivery Unit (in Cardiff). GA did not start with a prescribed structure or strict project management governance but took a deliberately flexible approach to be able to respond to local needs and opportunities. It was intended to take an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach and to be informed by co-production with partners, the community and men on Probation.

Start Up and Scoping

The core elements of GA were:

- Relocation of a Probation Service team to designated venues in the community.
- Identification of a cohort of men who would receive locality-based supervision.
- Commissioning third sector organisations to work with the Probation Service to identify services, opportunities and activities to which the men on Probation could be connected.

Two main scoping exercises were undertaken in the formation of GA:

- *Stakeholder engagement* and co-production workshops with lead organisations, residents and offenders living in Caerau and Ely to gain support and establish what services, organisations and activities were available.
- *Cohort analysis of male offenders*, to identify who would be supervised by GA, what the eligibility criteria would be, and the size and designation of the Probation Service team required.

Those eligible would be:

- Males under the supervision of the Probation Service who lived in Caerau and Ely (determined by the post code of their place of residence).

Men who presented a high risk of harm to staff or who were being managed by other specialist Probation teams were excluded, as were women as previously mentioned.

The Probation Service team comprised a senior probation officer, two probation officers, two probation service officers and a trainee probation officer. Third sector organisations were commissioned to work with the Probation Service and men on Probation as follows:

- *Phase One:* A partnership was initially appointed led by a Community Interest Company (CIC) working with a Community Development Organisation (CDO) based in the locality. They were later joined by a Charity which provided its Support Centre as the main local base for GA. The Charity became an operational partner during the period.
- *Phase two:* The partnership consisted of the CDO and the Charity (which continued to provide the main local base).
- *Phase three:* The CDO became the sole local organisation providing local support.

Findings and Discussion

The evaluation was conducted largely in the form of an action research project. Preliminary findings were shared as the fieldwork was undertaken, which contributed to the development of GA. Each of the five research questions is set out and discussed in turn below.

1. *How has the re-location of Probation Supervision into the local community been carried out and what barriers and enablers have supported it?*

Barriers faced:

- The delay to the start of GA due to Covid, the re-unification of the Probation Service and professional skepticism about whether GA was necessary.
- Various changes of venue, in the partnership arrangements and staff turnover within the Probation team led to 'change fatigue' for some.

Enablers included:

- The most productive relationships came from being based in the community.
- There was strong commitment from the Probation Officers (POs) and partners to make GA work.
- The POs responded well to the pressure and changes they continually faced.
- There was a high level of trust and confidence between the POs and support workers. The POs valued their expertise and recognised the difference they could make.
- The HMPPS Strategy Lead successfully established GA, was resilient, solution focused and prepared to make difficult decisions and changes when necessary.
- The men were successfully managed and there were no major incidents of concern regarding those being supervised.
- Each venue used by GA had advantages and disadvantages which could enhance or detract from community-based work. There were continual efforts to overcome operational difficulties.
- The Support Centre (which was the main local base for GA) worked well for a period with the combined presence of the partners and POs. Members of the community and offenders appeared to integrate well.
- Following the evaluation period, GA continued to positively develop and to implement lessons learned from past experiences.

2. *What changes in interventions and working practices have occurred as a result and how effective are they in supporting a more pro-social way of living?*
 - The men attended their appointments; community reporting was not seen as a soft option or non-compulsory. The POs anecdotally reported that compliance increased.
 - It was advantageous to connect the men to services and activities at the same time they were attending their Probation appointments.
 - The additional assistance from support workers (and peer mentors) who could resolve problems added value and supplemented what the Probation team was doing.
 - Good personal relationships were developed between the POs and most of the men, enhancing the scope for engaging them in meaningful rehabilitative work.
 - Community development and co-production were still developing. GA recognised that it needed to assist partner organisations to gain more understanding of what the Probation Service did and how they could work together.
 - Capacity building at the start could have helped to improve partner working practices.
 - There was a need to be realistic about what could be achieved with the resources available and whether community-based work suited all POs.
 - Planning lacked direction at times and it was not always clear whether it was top down or bottom up; ultimately HMPPS set the direction.
 - It proved difficult for the Probation Service to pilot working with smaller caseloads and there was a lack of consensus about what this should look like.
 - There could have been more clarity about whether GA needed a distinct identify and offer to the men.

3. *How have the men (and their families) experienced locality-based working, had their needs met and has this led to more positive relationships with their supervising officer, family and the community?*
 - The men preferred being seen in their own community; it removed barriers to attendance such as travel. Positive aspects were being in environments that were open to the public, provided good access to services, and did not reinforce criminal identity.
 - Holding appointments in more relaxed and less criminogenic environments helped the men to build a better rapport with their POs.
 - Some of the men engaged in the enrichment activities provided by the Support Centre and found it valuable.
 - Many of the men appreciated what was being done for them (problems being solved or reduced and support provided) and for some it led to significant life changes.
 - The POs would have liked more support workers to help the men to make local connections e.g. accompanying them to meetings/appointments.
 - Family members could accompany the men to the Support Centre, which helped the POs to learn more about family circumstances, dynamics and problems.
 - GA provided support to several family members, although the priority was focusing on the needs of the men which could improve the circumstances of their family.
 - Addressing intergenerational offending may not have been a realistic objective because of limitations in the resources available to GA, the necessary expertise, and the long-term involvement some families require.
 - GA has the potential to build links with local and national organisations which undertake family work.

4. *How have partnership approaches to support the work of the Probation Service developed (through commissioned third sector services and other partners) and what has and has not worked well and why?*
- There were varied experiences of partnership working; dynamics could change positively and negatively. It took time to build the right relationship with the lead partner, which came from a willingness to work through problems, identify how it could best contribute its expertise and better understand the implications of working with the Probation Service.
 - Where partnership relations did not work so well and endure, it was because the attitude and approach of the partner did not fit with GA, because conflicts could not be resolved, the partner was too overt about what it felt GA should be doing and not delivering what was required/disengaging.
 - Multi-agency work required effective communication structures which were difficult to get right, as none of the partners had full jurisdiction over the others and HMPPS ultimately decided what was right for the project (after negotiation and discussion).
 - When the Probation Service was in a shared space with other agencies, decisions had to be made about how the space was used. There were advantages in using venues open to the public (less stigmatising) but this made some risks more difficult to control (who attended). These matters needed to be addressed at the start of relations with partners/venues to clarify working practices and expectations.
 - There were varied opinions about whether the Probation Service should be co-located with other services; some regarded it as essential, others less so. What was important was knowing what services existed and how to access them.
 - GA was continuing to explore how community development/engagement could increase the support available to the Probation Service and meet the needs of individual men and finding the right organisations to do this.
 - GA had no clear blueprint, which was an advantage as it allowed flexibility and responsiveness to change, but a disadvantage as there was no clear format to follow in terms of replication.
5. *How has a sustainable community-focused approach been developed and to what extent have community links and associations for those under supervision in the area been strengthened?*
- It was not possible to say that GA had developed a sustainable community focus, but community development work was being reanimated towards the end of the evaluation period to establish if it could make a difference to the Probation Service.
 - Working with a lead partner which was embedded in the community, had funding from independent sources and could offer its wider services, gave GA more scope to develop and could lead to sustainable connections for the men.
 - GA was establishing links to services which could assist the men with their varied problems, tailored to individual need. POs working on their own could not achieve the same results particularly for those with complex and multiple problems.
 - Sustainability required some dedicated funding from HMPPS which could be provided if there was local commissioning of services.
 - The role and expectations of the community-based PO required further exploration in terms of functions, career pathways and utilisation of the knowledge gained.

Conclusions

GA is a positive and worthwhile initiative which is still developing, although questions remain about what family, community involvement and co-production look like and whether GA needs a particular identity or not. HMPPS was pursuing whether GA could be replicated, and activity was underway in several localities to explore how it could be achieved. The key elements that make it replicable are:

1. Determining what the general intention is for GA and what it looks like.
2. Identifying the right partners could take time and arrangements might need to change as the project developed.
3. Setting local governance and expectations at the start and clarifying the relationship to national governance and decision-making.
4. Co-production and capacity building within the partnership at the outset to support development.
5. Understanding what the local area has to offer and how services and activities can be accessed.

A full set of recommendations is contained in the main report. Future developments should focus on:

- Continuing to monitor the progress of men who engaged with GA and take up of services offered.
- Considering what the links should be with other specialist Probation teams and the Women's Pathfinder which have participants who live in Caerau and Ely, as well as with youth justice and youth services.

Limitations to the research

- It was not possible to determine whether the feedback provided by the men interviewed was fully representative of the GA cohort as whole.
- Despite repeated efforts the researcher was unable to interview family members who had received support from GA.
- The study relates to a single site case study, so generalisation of the findings is not possible.
- A comparison based on outcomes in similar areas of Cardiff was considered but not included because of doubts about the accuracy and comparability of the data.
- The evaluation did not seek to provide definitive evidence of a reduction in offending. This was being explored by HMPPS with the Ministry of Justice Data Lab.

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