

People and Work Unit

Welsh Assembly Government

**‘Extending Entitlement – Researching And Developing Knowledge
On Harder To Reach Young People And Their Access To
Entitlements’**

**Evaluating the Personal Support for Developing Learning
Pathways in Custody Pilot Projects**

Reflections On The Work Of Personal Support Workers

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Uned Pobl a Gwaith

1. Introduction

1.1. On the 21st March 2006, the two Personal Support Workers, Cari Sioux-Hodgkinson and Sam Jones, met with one of the external evaluators, Duncan Holtom, for the Welsh Assembly Government's Personal Support In Custody Pilot Project. The meeting was facilitated by Duncan Holtom and was designed to explore and capture the Personal Support Workers' analyses of:

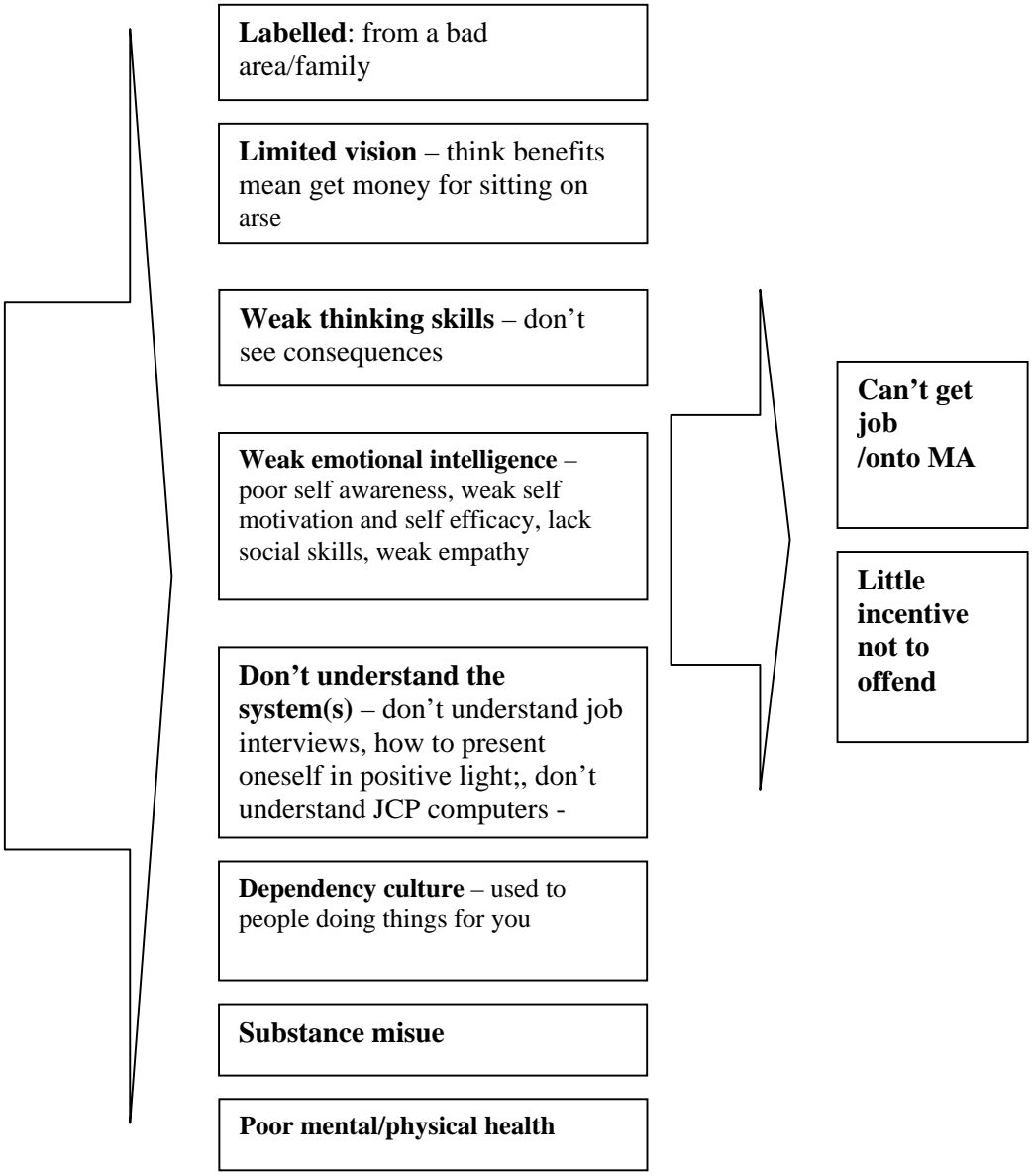
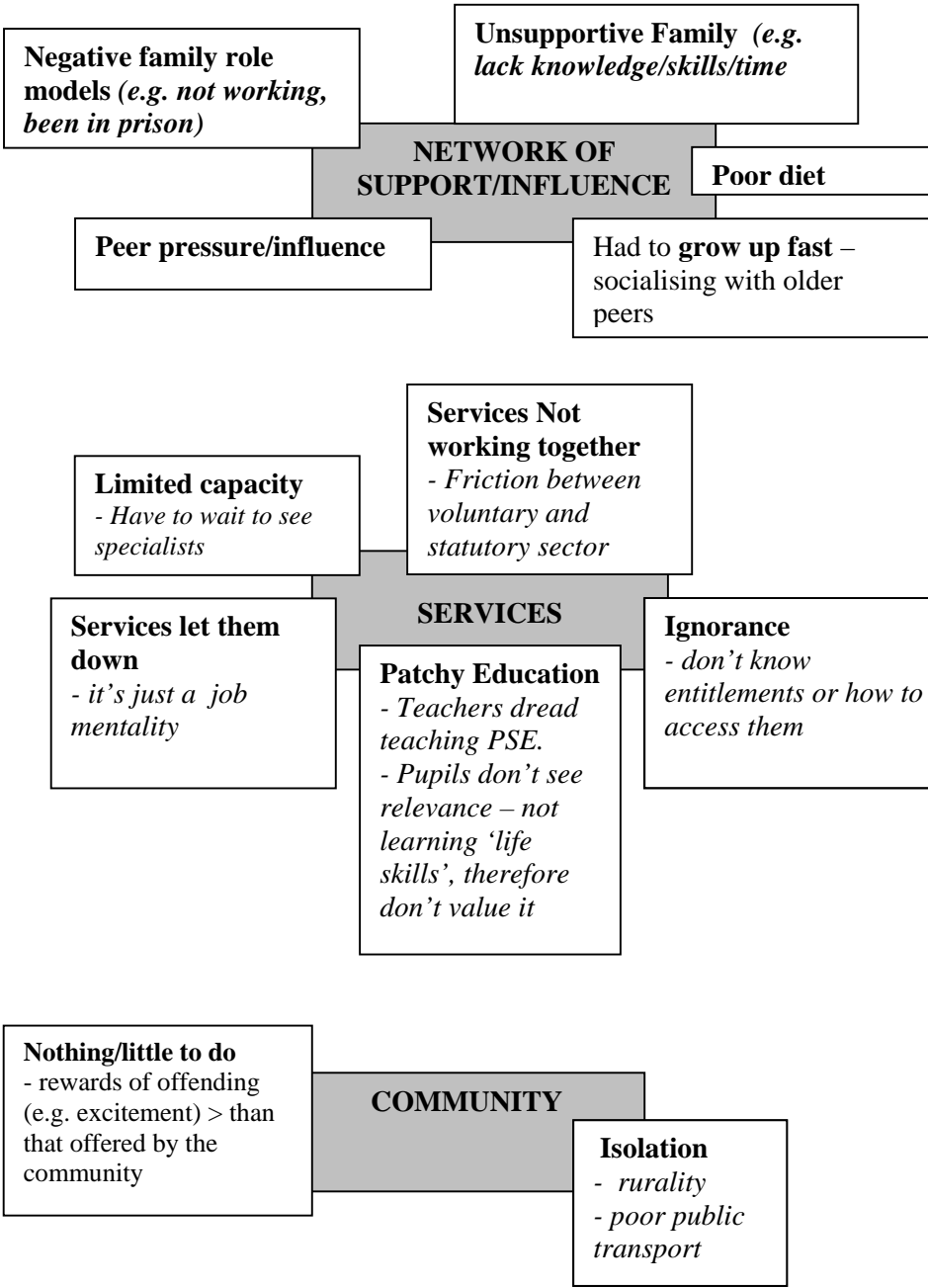
- The constellations of risk and protective factors that had led young people on the project toward or away from offending behaviour; and
- The ways in which young people might move onto and along new pathways that would lead into education and training and ultimately employment and the reduction or elimination (desistence) of offending behaviour.

1.2. The meeting was designed to serve both developmental and evaluative purposes. It was structured as a mapping exercise, identifying the different risk factors (see page 3) and the potentially protective role played by different institutions in a young person life (see page 4). The meeting gave Personal Support Workers the opportunity to share, reflect upon and learn from their experiences working with young people in HMP YOI Stoke Heath and Denbighshire and Ashfield YOI and Bridgend.

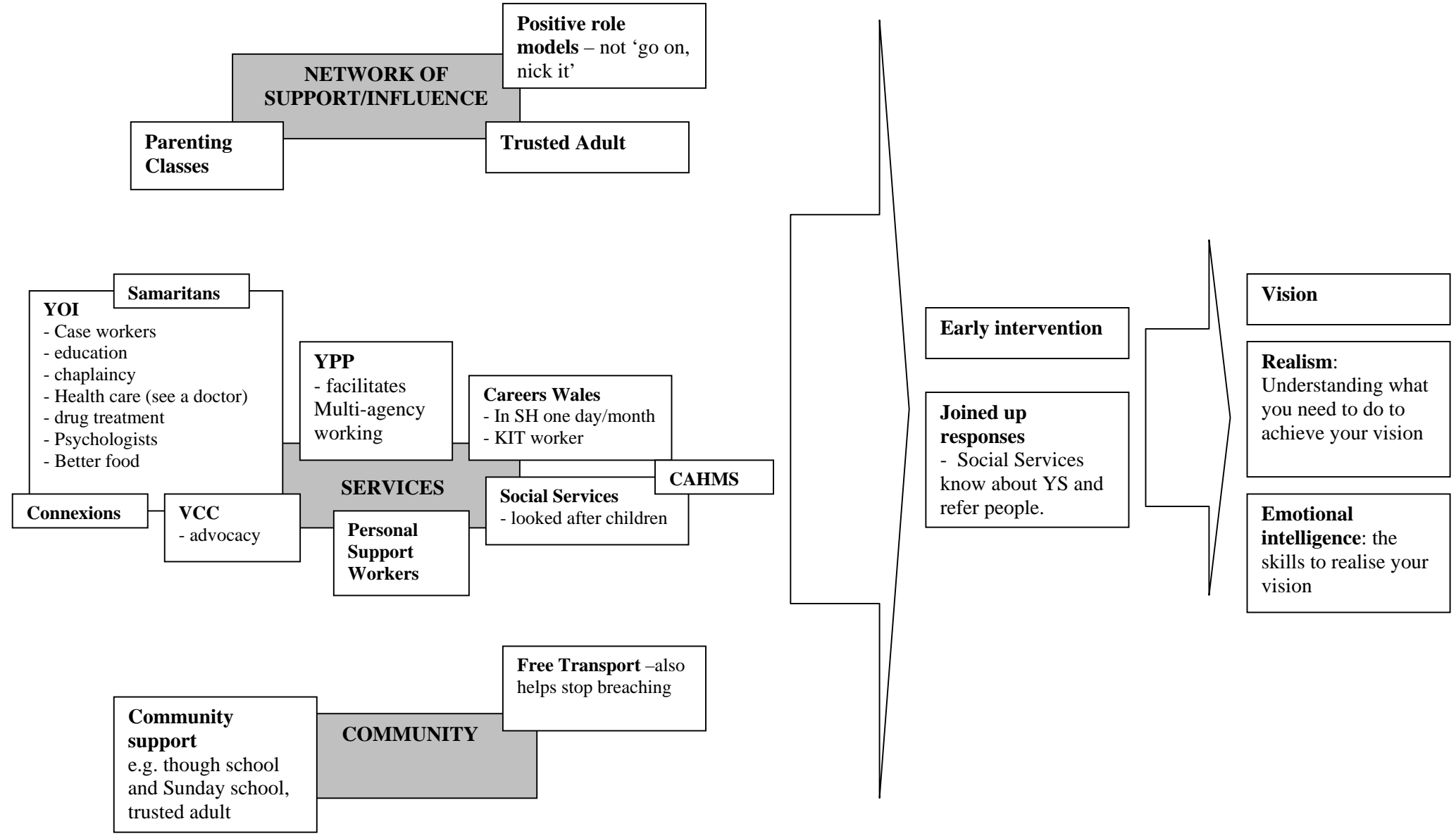
1.3. From an evaluative perspective, the process complements the assessment of impact prepared for the last Steering Group meeting with a narrative description of the process, suggested by Prof. Howard Williamson. This short paper summarises the meeting.

1.4. It is very important to bear in mind that although the paper seeks to situate the experiences of Personal Support Workers in the context of the wider literature on offending behaviour, the examples given are based purely upon observation of a small number of cases and are context specific. They are therefore not intended to present a general picture of the cause of offending behaviour or of service provision within Wales.

Risk Factors and Young People's Lives



Protective Factors and Young People's Lives



2. Discussion and Key Issues

2.1. **The Role of Parents & Guardians:** The analysis of Personal Support Workers suggests that offending behaviour cannot be reduced or explained by a single factor. Nevertheless, amongst the young people they are working with, the **absence of support from a parent or guardian** is a very significant factor in all but one of the cases. This may be because the absence of support reduces young people's **resilience** by making it harder for them to cope with problems and crises. It may also make it harder for young people to access and sustain protective factors such as stable housing, education and employment. Parents are consistently shown in studies to provide a key source of information on employment and the Learning Society publication 'Speaking truth to power - research and policy on lifelong learning' describes parents' roles as providing the context for decision making and planning:

'in almost all families parents provide a general framework of aspirations and hopes for their children, a space within which choices are made and validated'¹

2.2. This conclusion is in line with the literature on offending behaviour that suggests that in order to understand the impact of risk and preventive factors, we need to think not in terms of isolated events, but **processes**.² Taken together, the particular combination of risk and preventive factors a young person experiences, creates a "developmental pathway" that can lead them toward or away from criminal behaviour.³

¹ p.42, Ball, S.J, S. McRae & M. McGuire (1999). 'Young lives at risk in the 'futures' market: some policy concerns from ongoing research' pp 30-45 in Coffield, F. (ed). Speaking Truth to Power: Research and Policy on Lifelong Learning. Bristol: Policy Press

²Rutter M, Giller H And Hagell A ., 1998. *Antisocial Behaviour By Young People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

³McCarthy, P., Laing, K. And Walker, J., 2004, *The Offenders Of The Future? Assessing The Risk Of Children And Young People Becoming Involved In Criminal And Antisocial Behaviour*, Department For Education And Skills Research Report RR545.

[:Http://Www.Dfes.Gov.Uk/Research/Programmeofresearch/Projectinformation.Cfm?Projectid=14351&Keyword=&Type=5&Resultspage=101](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?Projectid=14351&Keyword=&Type=5&Resultspage=101)

2.3. Personal Support Workers highlighted the importance of a parent and guardian as a **role model** who played an important role socialising young people, fostering the internalisation of the norms and values of mainstream society. However they also placed considerable emphasis upon the **support** that parents/guardians provided. This support included both practical help accessing education and training and more indirect pastoral support – interest, encouragement and where necessary, challenge and exhortation.

2.4. The problem that Personal Support Workers identified was that, with one exception, all of the young people they worked with lacked effective support from a parent or guardian. As a consequence most of the young people they worked with had attempted an accelerated or “**fast track transition**” that had ended in failure, typically encompassing withdrawal from education and training, drug and alcohol abuse, temporary, unskilled employment and offending behaviour.⁴ In contrast, the literature suggests, more successful transitions are often **extended** or **staggered**, in which the period of dependent youth is lengthened.⁵

2.5. **Peers:** In the absence of a strong support from a parent or guardian, Personal Support Workers explained that the **influence of peers** grew. The problem Personal Support Workers identified was that the limited networks that young people were embedded in, meant that many young people had a narrow vision and little understanding of the consequences of their actions or how to realize their ambitions. This problem is reflected in the literature on transitions⁶.

2.6. Social networks are types of social capital that may help young people succeed. However, social capital can also hold people back if it is the ‘wrong’ type. For

⁴Jones, G. 2005. *The thinking and behaviour of young adults*, Literature review for the Social Exclusion Unit, London: ODPM, also available at <http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=794>

⁵Emphasis added, IRIS., 2001. *Misleading Trajectories? An Evaluation Of The Unintended Effects Of Labour Market Integration Policies For Young Adults In Europe* cited in Social Exclusion Unit., 2005. *Transitions: Young Adults With Complex Needs*. London: ODPM, also available at <http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=785> [accessed 2nd December 2005]

⁶Emler, N. 2001. *Self-esteem: The costs and causes of low self-worth*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. cited in Jones, G. 2005. *The thinking and behaviour of young adults*, Literature review for

example, Robert Putnam distinguishes between “**bridging**” and “**bonding social capital**”, suggesting the former facilitates the creation of new links and networks with people from other communities, whilst the latter can hold a community together and help it support its members, but can also make it insular and inward looking, isolating it.⁷ These insular networks may ‘trap’ people in a delinquent community whose norms and values exclude them from the rest of society.⁸ Indeed, although lone young offenders exist, offending is typically associated with two or more young men encouraging or inciting each other on in acts of daring that culminate in criminal offences.⁹

2.7. In response to the problems of negative peer pressure and influence, Personal Support Workers identified a role helping young people break free of the values and norms of their peers that were holding them back, by:

- Offering alternative networks (e.g. through sports and social activities); and
- By modelling different types of behaviour, values and norms.

2.8. This potential role is recognised in the literature, for example, ESRC-funded research into ‘*Pathways in and out of crime*’ has described the different pathways that offenders take as examples of “**risk navigation**” – where young people are able to use bridging social capital to build new social networks and move away from offending behavior and “**risk stagnation**”, where young people have been constrained by bonding social capital and unable to break free of the values and norms and behavior prevalent in their community.¹⁰

the Social Exclusion Unit, London: ODPM, also available at <http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=794>

⁷Emphasis added, Putnam, R. D. 2000. *Bowling Alone*. New York, Simon and Schuster.

⁸Cf. Bowman, H. T. Burden & J. Konrad. 2000., *Successful futures? Community Views on adult education and training*. York: JRF

⁹Downes, D., 1966. *Delinquent Solution*. London: Routledge; .Graham, J. And Bowling, B., 1995. *Young People And Crime*. Research Study 145. London: Home Office. Both cited in Social Exclusion Unit., 2002, *Reducing Re-Offending By Ex-Prisoners*. London: ODOM. Also available at <Http://Www.Socialexclusion.Gov.Uk/Downloaddoc.Asp?Id=64> [Accessed, 9th August 2005]

¹⁰Boeck, T., Fleming, J., Kemshall, H. (2005). 'The role of social capital in young people's navigation of risk pathways', paper presented to the BSA Annual Conference *Life Course: Fragmentation, diversity and risk*. University of York, March. cited in Jones, G. 2005. *The thinking and behaviour of young adults*, Literature review for the Social Exclusion Unit, London: ODPM, also available at <http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=794>

2.9. A difficult question that Personal Support Workers have identified, is whether young people should be forcefully removed from their communities, as happens when a YOT tries to separate offenders and discourage them from ‘hanging round’ with their mates. Personal Support Workers suggested that when a young person has so few alternative sources of support, “you couldn’t just take it away and offer nothing in its place”, asking “can that service provide emotional support if you tear people apart?” This led into a discussion about whether they should also be working with non-offenders in the community – people who were friends with the young people they were working with.

2.10. **Young Offender Institutions:** Personal Support Workers suggested that incarceration had the potential to become a “**fateful moment**” in the young persons’ life, an event or process that catalysed change through the shock, exposure to new ideas and people and the opportunity to reflect upon their lives.¹¹¹ However, they stressed that for this change to be successfully realised, the young person also needed to be able to draw upon the type of support resources that a parent or guardian might provide when back in their community.

2.11. Personal Support Workers discussed the nature of the relationship that a YOT or YOI worker has with young people, noting that they may, for example, have to discipline a young person and this could create resentment and weaken their relationship with that young person.

2.12. Issues around maintaining authority while providing support were discussed. Personal Support Workers commented that most young people responded to respectful, understanding adults but that prison service guidance designed to minimise the risk of ‘grooming’ actively discouraged this. They also voiced concerns about the impact that the power differentials between staff and offenders could have on the types of relationships that were possible in custody. This led into a discussion about the sensitivity of Personal Support Worker’s relationships with young people. They suggested that there were important

distinctions to be made between being “empathic” about young peoples’ circumstances and their offending behaviour, which they were, and being “sympathetic”, which they were not. In a similar way, they distinguished “compassion”, which they felt and “pity”, which they did not.

2.13. One question that was not discussed, but that might merit further attention, is the impact of the cultures of the two YOIs that Personal Support Workers are based in. For example, Ashfield was described as more a Welsh prison, with a larger population of Welsh offenders and Welsh Prison staff. This might be important because it was reported that when Welsh young people were with lots of other Welsh young people, they were reported to be calmer and less tense. This might also reduce the incidence of bullying. However, given the potential for incarceration to act as ‘fateful moment’, by introducing and exposing people to new ideas and values and breaking pre-existing networks, it might be arguable that a more diverse mosaic of young people, in which they mixed with more people from other areas and cultures, might be desirable.

2.14. **Personal Support Workers’ Roles:** In providing support, Personal Support Workers described two distinct types of role – that of ‘**Lead Professional**’¹² who helped ‘join’ up the response of other services and that of ‘**Trusted Adult**’¹³ who modelled appropriate behaviour and who provided more pastoral support and encouragement. The Dutch model, in which a young person who needed help could phone their ‘Guardian Angel’, was cited as an example of good practice here. In contrast, Connexions was highlighted as a model that in principle could provide this support, but in practice could not, given the size of workers’ caseloads.

2.15. Personal Support Workers explained that their ability to effectively act as a Lead Professional was constrained by the capacity and response of other services; their accessibility (in terms of both distance to travel and cost); the way that

¹¹Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge, Polity in Jones, G. 2005. *The thinking and behaviour of young adults*, Literature review for the Social Exclusion Unit, London: ODPM, also available at <http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=794>

¹²Department for Education and Skills, 2005, *Youth Matters*, <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/youth/> [Accessed, 11th October 2005]

young people perceived them; and the way other members of the community perceived young offenders. For example:

- The non-responsiveness of Social Services in one area;
- The inflexibility of Careers Wales services in one area, because of their limited capacity to provide outreach services in the community;
- Offenders aged 14-15 were happy to go to youth clubs, unlike those aged 16-17, who were not;
- The high costs of Bridge cards¹⁴ (£1300 for seven people/year);
- The reluctance of many young people to use services such as Careers Wales, because they did not identify with the people they perceived as using them; and
- Young people who had been excluded from some venues in one area by pressure from the community.

2.16. Given the institutional barriers they identified, Personal Support Workers identified how they operate as ‘Lead Professionals’, working as an **advocate** on behalf of young people, trying to change the way services were provided; and as ‘Trusted Adults’ working as **brokers** who helped link people to agencies and prepare them to use their services

2.17. **Personal Support Workers’ Experiences:** Personal Support Workers were clear that they needed the support of other agencies, but reported a mixed picture in their work as advocates, given the problem trying to even contact staff within agencies; perceived attempts by some to ‘fob them off’; and the reluctance of some Welsh agencies to “step over the border”. They also reported areas such as family support, which were considered important, but where they were unsure who to approach for help.

2.18. More positively, the work of the Denbighshire YPP in trying to engage uncommunicative services, and the response of Careers Wales North East, placing a visiting worker in HMP YOI Stoke Heath, were cited as an example of

¹³A term coined and popularised by the Princes Trust

good practice. They also contrasted the way in which the time they had invested in cultivating relationships with Prison Staff had built bridges and reduced tension, and the detachment of other agencies, such as the Voice of Children in Custody (VCC), which had created friction.

2.19. Personal Support Workers explained that in many cases, the environment mattered as much as the work. For example, work in Swansea on anger management was cited as an example of good practice, because it took place in a gym, rather than the YOT offices, creating a different atmosphere and giving more flexibility (e.g. if people were 'playing up', they could release their tension in the gym).

2.20. Personal support workers reported a number of successes in their role as brokers, preparing young people and making them feel comfortable: "demystifying it" as one put it. They discussed examples of how they had accompanied young people to gyms and libraries, building their confidence, expanding their comfort zone, creating new sources of interest and potentially, new social networks. However, the workers identified their full title ('Personal Support Worker in Custody') and their visibility and reputation in their own communities as people who worked with offenders, as an institutional barrier in its own right. It could, in effect, force disclosure of an offenders' status to other agencies they were working with (e.g. colleges), whether a young person wanted to disclose their criminal record or not.

2.21. Personal support workers concluded by reflecting on the highs of the job – the feeling when one of 'their boys' succeeded or even smiled for the first time and the lows, when they got out and got straight into trouble, and consequent feeling that they'd failed. They also questioned what 'success' meant, would for example someone not nicking cars for two months count as a success, even if they subsequently succumbed to his old ways.

¹⁴The cards give holders free access to leisure facilities across Bridgend.

2.22. Personal Support Workers made it clear that the work was **emotionally exhausting** and consequently also physically tiring. Both felt that they ‘carried the work home’ with them and both expressed the need for opportunities to discuss the highs and lows of the job in a confidential setting with someone they trusted and respected, although only one was able to do so regularly. They explained that the inherent stress of the role was compounded by the physical and social isolation of much of the work; problems further compounded by the need to maintain confidentiality and their colleagues lack of understanding of their work.

3. Effective Support - Key Characteristics

3.1. In exploring their own roles, the Personal Support Workers looked at how their work could complement that of other agencies working with the young people.

3.2. **Consistency:** Personal Support Workers explained that in their experience although workers from institutions, such as the YOI, YOT and Social Services, did sometimes provide some of the support that a parent or guardian could offer, this tended to be **episodic** or **intermittent**. Indeed it was common for workers to “swarm” at key events, such as Detention and Training Order (DTO) meetings, before dispersing again. This, they reported, often left young people feeling confused or overwhelmed, limiting their ability to make effective use of services and encouraging passivity and dependency. In some cases they suggested the sheer number of interventions, whilst impressive, might mean it became a source of pressure rather than the support it was intended to be.

3.3. **Reliability:** Personal Support Workers identified examples of good practice, but also highlighted cases where workers promised to do something but were unable to keep their promise, leaving young people feeling disillusioned and disappointed.

3.4. **Relationships of Trust and Respect:** The nature of the relationship that workers have with young people is complex. Workers need credibility and respect in order to be able to provide effective support. Respect cannot be taken for granted and does not come automatically with authority; it depends upon recognition by others.¹⁵ Respect provides a worker with influence and authority but needs to be founded upon an effective relationship between the worker and the young person. The problem that YOI and YOT workers face is that their role, which includes punishment and enforcement of the rules they operate within, can make it difficult for them to establish relationships of trust and respect. This can limit the acquisition of the respect that workers' need to both support, and where necessary, effectively challenge a young person's thinking and behaviour.

3.5. **Approach:** Personal Support workers explained that in their view, some people within the youth justice system appeared to approach a young person as broken and in need of 'fixing' by changing them. In contrast they explained that they saw their work as a process that started where the young person was at and worked from there on the young person's terms. They emphasised that this did not mean uncritical acceptance. If, for example, a young person expressed the ambition of joining the army, this did not mean their role would simply be that of an information provider, setting out what they would need to do to achieve their goal. They needed to go deeper, and ask, for example, whether this was the right choice for someone who responded negatively to being given orders.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. The key resource that the project has to offer the young people involved is the time, commitment and influence of the workers. The workers need to be able to offer the time to develop an effective relationship; the commitment to take that relationship seriously and the influence to help young people gain access to services and opportunities back in the community. The infrastructure they are working in - youth services, YPPs and other local networks - are crucial in giving

¹⁵ Weber, M. 1921 [1968]., *Economy and Society* . Totowa, New Jersey: Bedminster Press

the Personal Support Workers the capacity to do their jobs. These recommendations focus on the role of the infrastructure and how it could be consolidated and developed in order to enhance the pilot project and embed its work into mainstream activities.

4.2. To sustain work in this type of environment an individual worker needs a lot of support, encouragement and professional guidance. The work can be unrewarding and frustrating as workers get to know individuals and begin to see change that stalls or even reverses as circumstances change or opportunities fail to materialise. Workers need regular 'emotional' support that gives them an opportunity to debrief, discuss concerns, share successes and receive feedback from someone they trust and respect. **We recommend that host agencies ensure that each of the Personal Support Workers meets with a nominated supervisor at least monthly for a formal review session and has weekly access to less formal debriefing sessions.**

4.3. Workers also need practical support if they are to operate as 'Lead Professionals' advocating on behalf of young people to other agencies. The key role here is that of the YPP. The YPP could help identify nominated people for Personal Support Workers to go to in key agencies and provide a forum for working out the lines of combination between different agencies, to ensure that every young person who returns to the community after a period in a YOI, receives the support he or she needs. The project could provide an interesting test case for exploring how effectively YPPs can ensure that agencies respond to young people's needs. **We recommend that the Personal Support Workers use presentations to the YPPs to identify issues arising from the work and the contribution the YPP could make to addressing those issues. If useful the evaluators could also present some findings.**

4.4. There is some evidence that the Personal Support Workers are isolated even within their own host agency, given the very different nature of their work. The project needs the understanding and commitment of colleagues in the workers agencies for three core reasons

- To provide part of a supportive infrastructure for the workers, providing encouragement and sharing knowledge
- To use their knowledge to shape preventative interventions. For example, a Personal Support Worker may identify how the peer group of the young person they are working are also being at risk and work with colleagues to develop a preventative response.
- To embed the learning from the project in the agency. The danger when pilot projects are treated as discrete pieces of work, divorced from mainstream activity in an organisation is that the knowledge and practices developed by the pilot is lost when the funding goes. Involving colleagues is a way to ensure the sustainability of the work.

We recommend that the Personal Support Workers and their managers prepare a presentation on the project to colleagues which includes an exploration of the role of the host agency and how this could be developed.

4.5. In order to enhance the impact of the work, there may be a case for exploring what additional support could be provided to families of young people on the project. **We recommend that projects explore the potential for developing family links including visiting parents before a young person is released to discuss plans and ways of providing support.**