

Found in Transition? Local Inter-Agency Systems for Guiding Young Adults into Better Lives:

Final Report of the Formative Evaluation of the T2A Pilots

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Three Transition to Adulthood (T2A) pilots were introduced as part of a movement to give prominence and priority to services for 'young adults' in the criminal justice system, recognising that this is a stage in life when the adjustments and passages in the life-course are at their most challenging and when those already involved in offending are at risk of becoming the most prolific. The Barrow Cadbury Trust has been at the forefront of this movement, funding a commission of inquiry, an alliance of interested organisations and three pilots to pioneer appropriate services in their locale.

The broad purpose of the T2A movement has been to put 'young adulthood' on the map used by criminal justice and community services so that it is more conspicuous as a distinct area of need, and to achieve a more joined-up approach across the age divide separating services, and across the different sectors. Categories of young adults with different needs or additional challenges – ethnic minority, female, disabled, mentally ill, substance addicted – are particularly within the ambit of the initiative, because of their combined vulnerabilities.

The pilots are in London, Birmingham, and Worcestershire respectively. Two are led by voluntary sector services: the St Giles Trust runs the one in South London as part of its SOS project, and YSS (not an abbreviation) runs the one in Worcestershire. The third one, in Birmingham, is delivered by the Staffordshire and West Midlands Probation Trust. They commenced operation as T2A teams during the period December 2008 and July 2009, though the two voluntary sector teams were able to embed this work within existing projects. Still with one year to run, in effect they have a dual function: on an operational level, they are demonstrating effective work with young adults at risk; on an institutional level, they are blazing a trail for inter-agency policies that will bridge gaps between services and ensure joined up provision for young adults.

So far so good ...

The pilots have made great progress in putting into practice the purposes set for them by BCT's Commission for Transition to Adulthood and the subsequent T2A Alliance. The inroads they have made are on two main fronts: their present work with service users (that is, at the *beneficiary level*) and their more future oriented strategic planning with other agencies (that is, at the *institutional level*). The work on these two fronts includes many strands. They add up to a complex package which – especially with reference

to continuity in the future – might be summed up as the *development of local inter-agency systems for guiding young adults into better lives*.

There are some differences between the three pilots. Building on existing services they are not all at the same stage of development, and they have evolved along slightly different lines.

The London pilot, at St Giles Trust, employs ex-offenders as both paid and unpaid workers. It has integrated the T2A work with other projects with a relevant but different remit, so that the ‘young adult’ focus has been somewhat blurred. What it has been able to do remarkably well is engage people who would otherwise have been sceptical about and shunned offers of supportive contact, and with its programme of involving ex-offenders it has been able to turn the helped into helpers.

At Birmingham the probation-led T2A service has, in contrast to when it started, become somewhat less about the direct work with young people and more about becoming a hub that can link them to relevant services. The Birmingham pilot learned and thereby demonstrated that young adult work should not be in a vacuum but needs to engage young people with community services and to integrate public and voluntary sector contributions.

In the Worcestershire model, qualified youth justice workers with help from volunteer mentors provide a sustained supportive role and a wraparound service by drawing on its network of interagency connections. The Worcestershire pilot has been equally strong in its present service delivery dimension and in its forward looking institutional dimension. YSS, the voluntary sector organisation leading it, has been selected by the West Mercia Probation Trust to be its primary partner, partly as a consequence of the valuable work demonstrated by the T2A pilot.

It is possible to exaggerate such differences between the pilots, however, at the expense of what they have in common.

On the policy front, they have made progress within their areas in stimulating thinking and planning towards durable interagency systems, and in establishing the principle that distinct provision should be made for supporting young adults as a matter of standard practice. The teams are zealous and imaginative in developing links with other services, in raising awareness of the needs of vulnerable young adults and in creating an interface between services. Activities in this respect include forming multi-agency T2A steering groups; holding local conferences to publicise and discuss the work; development of protocols for transition arrangements between youth and adult services; as well as ‘bottom up’ developments when working collaboratively on particular cases.

Perhaps their main achievement on the policy front, is in publicising on a local level the compelling argument that crime could be reduced, money could be saved and lives improved simply by a more concerted and joined-up approach to helping young adults through the transitions of young

adulthood. Through their work they have helped raised awareness that becoming mature is a process and does not happen at the stroke of an eighteenth birthday, and that becoming independent in the modern social landscape is a slippery climb.

The practice ethos of the pilots is one of offering help. The important work to reduce reoffending is integral but contextualised in that supportive framework. The pilots have employed staff to work intensively with the young people, with support from volunteers, and the role combines mentoring and brokerage (connecting them to services and resources). While reducing (re)offending by these service users is a core concern and prime objective, this is woven into the broader purpose of enabling them to 'get on' in their lives and to navigate the transitions they have to make (from post-adolescence to maturity; from the youth justice system to the adult system; from custody to resettlement). It is therefore, in effect, welfare-based (in the interests of the service user) and, as such, considerably removed from standard risk-based, offender management practice in the criminal justice system.

So far, the pilots are largely successful in engaging young adults in taking up the offered service. The help given is a combination of mentoring and connecting them to services, training and the practical steps they need to take to make progress. All of the pilots are using a person-led, task-focused (or solution focused) model for working with the service users. Through the expression of genuine concern, interest and respect for the individual, the practitioners are able to form a working alliance in which they engage the young person in formulating and following an action plan to help them resolve difficulties, often linked to offending, and to reach their goals.

The early results from the case studies, and the beliefs of the key players, suggest that the pilots are helping young people to avoid involvement in offending and to make improvements in their lives.

Distance-travelled measures and qualitative interview data obtained in a sample of 29 case studies show improvements associated with reduced reoffending. According to their self-reports, half of the young people had not reoffended during the six to twelve month period following T2A support. The other half reported that their reoffending was less frequent and less serious, and they are more optimistic about their ability to desist in the future. Compared against the dramatically high reconviction rate for persistent young offenders, these are encouraging results. The participants mostly attributed these improvements to the support and referrals provided by the pilots. However, in a service that is an interface to other services, it is difficult to say where T2A ends and another service begins, and therefore improvements cannot simply be attributed to the added value provided by the pilot.

Explaining what 'works' and how

By applying a participatory, theory-oriented approach, the formative evaluation has aimed to access implicit theories or reasoned arguments in order to begin to identify social, behavioural and institutional mechanisms

that explain why T2A interventions ‘work’, or are expected to work. This builds on the knowledge base of rehabilitation and desistance research, to achieve a more penetrating analysis of what causes or contributes to effectiveness.

^ The formation of a working alliance (based on mutual respect or acceptance, agreed goals and tasks) increases the young adult’s sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, which motivates continuing engagement with the programme and readiness to respond to its requirements (that is, take steps towards change).

^ Similarly, the use of strengths-based principles (emphasising what the person can do and their strengths rather than their mistakes and weakness) also supports this mechanism for engagement and effort (that is, increases the young adult’s sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, which in turn, motivates or bolsters their readiness to take steps towards change).

^ The adoption of an action plan which is largely determined by the individual according to what they most want to resolve and achieve (solution focused and goal driven) ensures that the effort is synchronised with their own approach goals. The required application and effort from them coincides with their pursued direction rather than going against the grain of their wishes. They cooperate because what is being required of them turns out to be what they want anyway, providing it does not involve offending. The programme thus respects and promotes their own agency in making changes.

^ The development of a respectful, empathetic, and amicable working relationship results in a positive attitude to the practitioner or volunteer so that there is a readiness to work together with that person. This makes the process easier and more pleasant and, having accepted the support, increases optimism about obtaining what they need and doing things differently.

^ It is a model of work that gives the service user the lead role in making things happen, gives them a taste of being in control and rewards them for achieving small steps thereby building up self-efficacy.

^ Sustained desistance from crime also requires cognitive transformation, and that the individual has access to the material resources and opportunities to lead a law-abiding future. Therefore other social and institutional factors have to be brought into play – and this may take a little longer. In brief, the programme connects them to material resources and opportunities, and promotes changes in self-concept and identity.

To summarise some of the critical steps that are involved, the following have been identified as making a critical difference to engaging the young person and working towards change:

- The contact with the T2A intervention is optional on the part of the service user (and, in keeping with that, is not rule-bound).
- A friendly, helping relationship is established (a working alliance).

- The meetings are focused on an action plan, suggested or agreed by the service user, to desist from offending and improve their situation and behaviour.
- The purpose and objectives are person-centred and problem focused (for the person's benefit and led by their concerns).
- The person-led action plan respects and nurtures the individual's personal agency and efforts to make changes.
- The worker extends a 'life-line' (rescue service or support and advice) to the young adult; they can be contacted by phone or text in times of crisis.

The philosophy of practitioners and their mode of working with young adults is attuned to recent thinking in rehabilitation research and desistance theory. It also has much resonance with traditional practice in probation and youth justice before they shifted from a social work ethos to becoming linked to punitive law enforcement services. However, some of that older model was unhelpfully associated with psychoanalysis and over-individualised without reference to structural factors; whereas a desistance paradigm for working with offenders links strengths based, positive psychology with practical help and environmental factors. Recent application of desistance theory to rehabilitation practice are bringing the Good Lives Model¹ of rehabilitation into prominence, and the T2A model of practice has a clear resemblance to this.

The pilots are demonstrating a practice model which is successful in engaging young people in actions which will help them towards better lives (reduced reoffending and more fulfilling lives) and they have in different ways facilitated inter-agency working and an interest in developing ongoing systems for including young adults in the services that they offer. Both the mentoring and brokerage elements of the service seem vital. The motivation to become self-supporting and to settle into responsible adulthood must be complemented by the practical means to do so. There should be continuity of a helping relationship from someone who knows the individual and is respected by him or her. But neither will work without the young adult being motivated to make improvements, desist from crime and put effort into the process.

... But not there yet

The promising results so far give rise to optimism but there is much further to travel. The early indications are that this programme could make a radical difference in reducing the offending of those in that period of life at which offending behaviour is more prevalent and frequent. Becoming an adult, and desistance from crime, typically, take some time. This principle, of course, is at the crux of the argument for giving up on expectations for a smooth shift to mature responsible behaviour. The effects on reoffending, and related indicators of improvement, may be more impressive, or less, after greater 'exposure time' to the package of support being put in place (including both mentoring and pathways to other services and resources). It will take longer

¹ Ward, T. and Maruna, S. (2007) *Rehabilitation*. London and New York: Routledge.

to embed 'sustainability' into the interagency arrangements being fostered. Moreover, the effects of spending cuts, reductions in job opportunities and changes to the welfare system will inevitably make the journey harder. Changing lives needs both the *will* and the *ways*).²

Issues in sustaining the good work

The processes and mechanisms involved in sustained positive outcomes or delayed success, are likely to be somewhat different from those involved at the start of a programme. For this reason a more extensive formative period will provide more opportunity for learning from the pilots especially in relation to longer term outcomes for present service users, sustaining the good work that has been achieved so far, and the difficulties that will be thrown up by spending cuts, changes to the benefits service, and in the availability of accommodation and jobs.

Looking ahead, and drawing on empirical research as well as the insights shared by T2A participants and stakeholders, the following observations are worth noting. These include practice strengths that may have greater importance than has been fully appreciated; and possible perils that may be foreseen and perhaps circumvented.

➤ As well as pathways to resources and opportunities, the relational work, or the working alliance, remains paramount for those who are struggling with multiple needs. The importance of this should not be overshadowed by the attention being given to referral and involving other services. There should be clarity regarding who will take on the 'lead professional' role – that is, the practitioner 'who takes responsibility for ensuring that all of the client's needs are identified and met as fully as possible',³ and who is usually the one who works directly with the young person, maybe in conjunction with a volunteer mentor.

➤ Helping to turn lives around may be brief in many cases, but will need to be prolonged and recurrent in others. Setbacks and barriers to better lives can be demotivating for the young adults, and sustaining a working alliance will help to keep them on track. It will be important to ensure that it is not neglected and that there is continuity and, if a period of concentrated support is going to be time limited – which makes sense – there should be a way back for more if needed, or to dip back now and again for 'top up' support and crisis intervention.

➤ The T2A worker's interpersonal skills and attitudinal stance towards the service user seem more important than whether they are qualified professionals or volunteer mentors. What seem to matter more than previous training and professional experience are their genuineness in forming a

² Snyder, C. R. (2002). 'Hope theory: rainbows in the mind', *Psychological Inquiry*, 13, 249-275.

³ HM Government (2009) *Taking the Lead: Supporting the Lead Professional Role in Tackling Social Exclusion*. London: Cabinet Office, page 4. <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/321245/taking-lead.pdf>

helping relationship, and their ability to respond constructively to vicissitudes in the young person's circumstances and state of mind.

- That the person can choose or refuse to take up and continue with a T2A intervention, rather than it being a sentence or licence requirement, is understood to be critical to their engagement and co-operation with it. Therefore T2A intervention should continue to be taken up on a voluntary basis rather than imposed as a mandatory requirement.
- Given the voluntary nature of the young person's take up of T2A support, third sector services seem better suited to providing the lead professionals for the relational work with young adults, because they are free from the punitive, offender management baggage which the public sector criminal justice services now carry. Similar benefits could be derived from T2A support as an optional addition to a community sentence or post-prison licence if public sector services commission third sector agencies to deliver the main mentoring and brokerage role.
- A continuing 'young adult' focus should be safeguarded by making its provision a statutory obligation of public sector services. The present commissioning frameworks for inter-agency work and buying-in services from the community provide the means for contracting this work to the voluntary sector. The benefits at stake from joined-up provision make this ideal terrain for developing better systems for these two sectors to work together. As well as contracting out the service delivery role, statutory provision might include the appointment of a lead manager and responsibility for running a T2A steering group.
- The 'T2A' brand may be worth retaining once the work being done becomes mainstream. The image of a service may link to a hidden mechanism in engaging otherwise reluctant service users. A good name and other image factors, such as the youth, status, or background of the workers, can make for a service that is more attractive to young adults; that is, which makes it 'cool', comfortable or less embarrassing for them to engage with, and makes the service proffered seem more plausible.

If local T2A interventions work to change behaviour and improve lives, they do so by *helping* (as opposed to treating, punishing, restricting, threatening and other variants that are imposed on those who offend). Where social behaviour is concerned, it is at the level of the individual's response that interventions work. The person agrees to engage and, importantly, applies their efforts because what is offered is in their interests, and is helping them deal with their situation and move towards their, legitimate, goals. The process of maturing and leading a better life cannot be done for the person or to the person; they do that themselves, and intervention can only support and help propel their own agency in making changes. Thus the T2A package is a force driving in the same direction as the person, though with a current towards law-abiding pathways.

The frequency with which transition to adulthood now features in policy and political discourse indicates that the present campaign has struck a chord in public consciousness. There is a growing consensus that in twenty-first

century, austerity Britain (and in other parts of the world), it is much harder to get securely set-up as an independent, self-supporting adult. Those with disadvantaged backgrounds and in the criminal justice system have a much steeper ascent. This ties in with an increased awareness of the numerous transitions that young people make between agencies and between life situations, each of which may be critical moments for slipping or progressing in life. The work of the pilots is providing very good examples and insights into how concentrating resources on young adults in transition is a good investment.

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