



# Hoping for a better future? How to make probation a more hopeful experience

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# What is hope?

- Hope is ‘the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways’ (Snyder, 2002: 249)
- Hope is a ‘way of thinking’ that is structured in a way to either 1) reach, sustain or increase factors that are linked to positive goals or 2) that are focused on deterring or delaying negative goals
- Hope requires : (a) “a belief that an event  $p$  is possible,” (b) “the goal that  $p$  occurs,” and (c), “the belief that  $p$ ’s attainment is not (completely) within one’s control.” (Miceli & Castelfranchi 2015: 161, 163).



# Hope in the criminal justice system



- Thus, hope is an important aspect in change
- Hope is closely related to perceptions of agency, and ability to enact agency
- Having hope has been linked to ‘positive’ outcomes and is a ‘key mechanism of psychological survival’ which helps with ‘maintaining sanity, particularly during the initial phase of the sentence’ (Crewe et 2020: 116 - 115).
- Having hope has been linked to as reduced reoffending, desistance etc (Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Martin and Stermac, 2010; Farmer et al, 2015).
- Very little research on hope in probation/community settings



# Institutional and transformational hope (Seeds, 2022)

- Institutional hope: hope which is tied to institutional rules and contexts. E.g. getting to the end of an order without being breached, coping with the pains of the punishment or having hope for a successful appeal or resentencing.
- Transformational hope: 'not invested in existing legal, medical or other paths. Rather, hope begins with the loss of the structures upon which daily life was organized and that previously gave life meaning. Here, ... hope is a process of reorientation, traversing an unmapped terrain towards a future that is not known'



# Hope in probation

- What does hope 'look like' in the context of probation?
  - What do practitioners and people on probation hope to get out of probation?
  - (How) does probation enable people to have hope? And what gets in the way of this?
  - How can the probation service create the conditions for more hopeful futures for people on probation?
- <https://penalreformsolutions.com/hope/>



# Probation in England and Wales

- Partially privatized between 2014 and 2021 – Transforming Rehabilitation (TR)
- TR had devastating effect on service resulting a deskilled and two-tier service
- Unified in June 2021 to create the Probation Service
- Part of the Civil Service and HM Prison and Probation Service
- Probation is now: heavily centralized, suffering from high profile errors, experiencing high staff turnover and employing less experience people, highly bureaucratized, not performing well in inspections and geared towards risk-focused methods of practice



# Methods: co-producing the research

- Walking groups
- Four groups of lived experience/former CJS staff walked to Hope (n=20)
- Recruited from a local recovery forum and Penal Reform Solutions
- Discussed the concept of hope in the context of probation, gauged interest and used them to help us think about hope and the right way of asking about it.
- We found that the concept was a common one, which people could relate to, knew what the term meant in this context and could provide discursive answers to.





# Methods: interviews

- Carried out by the whole research team
- Semi-structured interviews
- Thematic analysis

	Number of participants
People on probation and people who used to be on probation	24
Former-probation staff	11
Current probation staff	6
Working on the edge of the criminal justice system	2
Policy worker	5
Other stakeholders (e.g. politicians, sentencers)	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>52</b>



# What is the function of hope in probation?

- Hope for me is about instilling, in the person that you're supervising, that they are talented and skilled and the minute they find what is meaningful for them, that they will fly and they will have an opportunity to live a peaceful life. I think it's about having hope in other people and recognizing that they have had a number of challenging situations and historical situations that led to them feeling maybe hopeless and not having options in their life. And I think hope just provides energy and it provides motivation and it provides engagement and I guess just that realization that their life can be better.



# What do people hope to get from probation?

- 'Good job'
- 'To get clean'
- 'I was just a bad penny, really at the time. So I didn't really have have much hopes or dreams.'
- 'Not to go to prison. To have a normal life, I said. Because I was like, yeah, I I really have an addiction with opiates and ... So get clean. I wanted to change my life and I wanted to ... Maybe I just wanted to be a normal 16 - 17 year old girl, you know'
- 'The purpose for me was avoid getting recalled'



# Hopelessness



- I have no hope or at that time, I'll be quite honest with you, It was just basically the way I seen it was like they're just an authority figure over me. And at that time I was rebelling against any sort of authority. So I just seen them as police and that was it ... I didn't want to get anything out of it.
- Hopelessness seemed to be present from the outset, or emerge during the course of the sentence



# Institutional hope

- Interviewer: What did you hope to get out of that sentence?
- Participant: I didn't. I just wanted to get it over and done with so I could carry on with my life. I didn't hope to get anything from it. It was a inconvenience.
- It's about getting through what they've been sentenced to. I think as well they're not so bothered as people about being on the order. Sometimes they just, you know, having a hard time and – I don't know – are just looking for support from probation maybe and maybe I think for them it's just about it not being a negative and there being a positive. So that's why I try and support them by being that positive thing in their life. If I can.
- Institutional hope appeared to be fairly constant across the sentence



# Transformational hope

- He just wanted better for himself than his family. He lived in a very small house. Everybody was on receipt of benefits and he said I don't want that for myself. I want to have a nice house. I want to have a nice car. That was his, I guess, his hopes, his dreams, his aspirations and he just he for months and months and months. He was trying to get some kind of qualification or job. And one day he got on the rail track programme. And that was it. He was setting himself goals, which again for me, I think hopes and goals for me are quite linked. And, you know, he had this goal that he wanted to be, you know, a manager within rail track and earn quite good money. He recognised there was things he needed to do just to get there. And it was like that once he'd got there, he'd achieved his, his hopes, his dreams, what he wanted.
- Transformational hopes grew as people progressed through their sentence



# What gets in the way of hope?

I found whenever I went and spoke with probation, I had about three or four different probation officers and none of them really had much in terms of what they could do for me whenever I asked or looked for options. They were very limited. So it was more just a case of everything was on repeat, what are you doing? How's things since last time? Have you found anything? Is there anything else we can help with? great. We'll speak again in two weeks. So yeah, that gives you a bit of an idea as pretty much just a monitoring service, I've helped nothing more.



# Tick box culture

- Probation is too focused on the tick box. Checks, have they been where they're supposed to be? Yes, right. Okay, job done, next person. Not in terms of. Is there any quality or is there any change been there. Have they turned up? Yes or no, right next one. So, it's pile them high and sell them cheap. folks, at the moment, which is a bit so understandable, given the high caseloads.
- I think the tick box culture is just a way in which you can completely dehumanize someone in the span of a 10-minute phone call. To not have any interest in an individual's life. I could think just drowns hope and to not see their strengths drowns hope.
- Yeah, I think there's a lot of times when it's unable to nurture hope. I think there's a lot of focus on checklist almost supervision, lots of things that you've got to ask, you've got to record, and almost in doing that because the pressure is always Record as you're going along. It can prevent a conversation. And actually because of time constraints and caseloads. It's more focused on the process than the answer.



# Workloads

- Staffing is a huge thing, the reason why I raise that is because morale is so low. So you've got officers that don't have hope themselves in their job. I never dreaded going to work. I loved my job. I never had that Monday morning feeling. Where I thought I don't want to go to work. I do now. We got told the other day in our area, which we work we are a 100 probation officers short, a hundred probation officers! So the impact on everyone in terms of how much their workload is like a domino effect. So my hope as a practitioner has gone because I'm going to environment where It's just, you're fighting fires all the time.



# Compliance and monitoring

- I found whenever I went and spoke with probation, I had about three or four different probation officers and none of them really had much in terms of what they could do for me whenever I asked or looked for options. They were very limited. So it was more just a case of everything was on repeat, what are you doing? How's things since last time? Have you found anything? Is there anything else we can help with? great. We'll speak again in two weeks. So yeah, that gives you a bit of an idea as pretty much just a monitoring service, I've helped nothing more... So I think at times I did feel it was a bit of hopelessness because, you expect probation to be your first point of call when you leave, to then be there for you. And as I said, it didn't feel like it was someone or somewhere where I could just have a chat or have some opportunity open to me, it was just more of a monitoring service.



# Lack of flexibility and discretion

- Probably probation supervision may hinder rehabilitation because actually people are getting this shit together and actually having to constantly go to probation stuff or inflexibility means that it's interfering with them trying to maintain a job or maintaining family contact or things like that. because probation is unwieldy tool that says, "Don't care if you've got a job interview, You see me at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning" ... it can hinder people ... and that can diminish their hope because they see probation as more of a cruel punishment, if you get what I mean, Because it's not just "*I've got to go, that's fine. But you seem to be purposely making it so; it doubly punishes me.*"
- Yeah, I was increasingly being. I was increasingly being dictated to in terms of the parameters of how we could work. The ability to actually meaningfully do my job was going away. It was becoming much more risk management focused.



# Risk focus



- I think the way of new probation officers being recruited is very much based on the corporate model. So they are recruiting people that are particularly interested in risk management and meet the corporate kind of ethos, so you get officers that will be very punitive and aren't very very rehabilitative.
- I think we dash hopes all the time in terms of the way that we have to risk manage because that, you know, nearly always, that's inherently against somebody's hope, and often that's a picture of if we think about pre-sentence reports about being able to move on and move forward, and actually it can be about residing at places you know and being able to stay there and having that you know having that hope that actually they can



# Cultures of fear and blame

- I think hope is impacted significantly by a person's level of fear. And if you take somebody on license, By the very nature of being on license. there is always that risk that even just being late to a probation appointment can land you back in prison. I would say that their levels of hope are impacted by the overwhelming level of fear of recall. So yeah, I'd say that people are on community supervision who are not on a license.
- If I'm completely honest the whole risk thing, I think, and I don't blame probation practitioners themselves are blind to the system a little bit. I think they're scared of making any decisions. I think they're scared of following their gut. I think they're scared of following their intuitions because if anything goes wrong they become accountable and from the impression ... I think there's kind of a culture of if you get something wrong and you make a mistake, you kind of hung out to dry.



# Punishment and a lack of trust

- There was this to and fro, and this underlying resistance, always from probation officers as I saw it and probation workers, you know, across the field that actually we had to, we had to accept the element of punitive, more punitive measures and the use of punishment in a way that wasn't necessarily constructive
- Why would you trust somebody and share your hope with somebody? That's a really personal thing, hope isn't it? For somebody to say to you what they hope for means that they're putting a lot on the line. It is very difficult, particularly for a lot of people who may have experienced that and then not seeing things through, you know or not have professionals see things through with them.



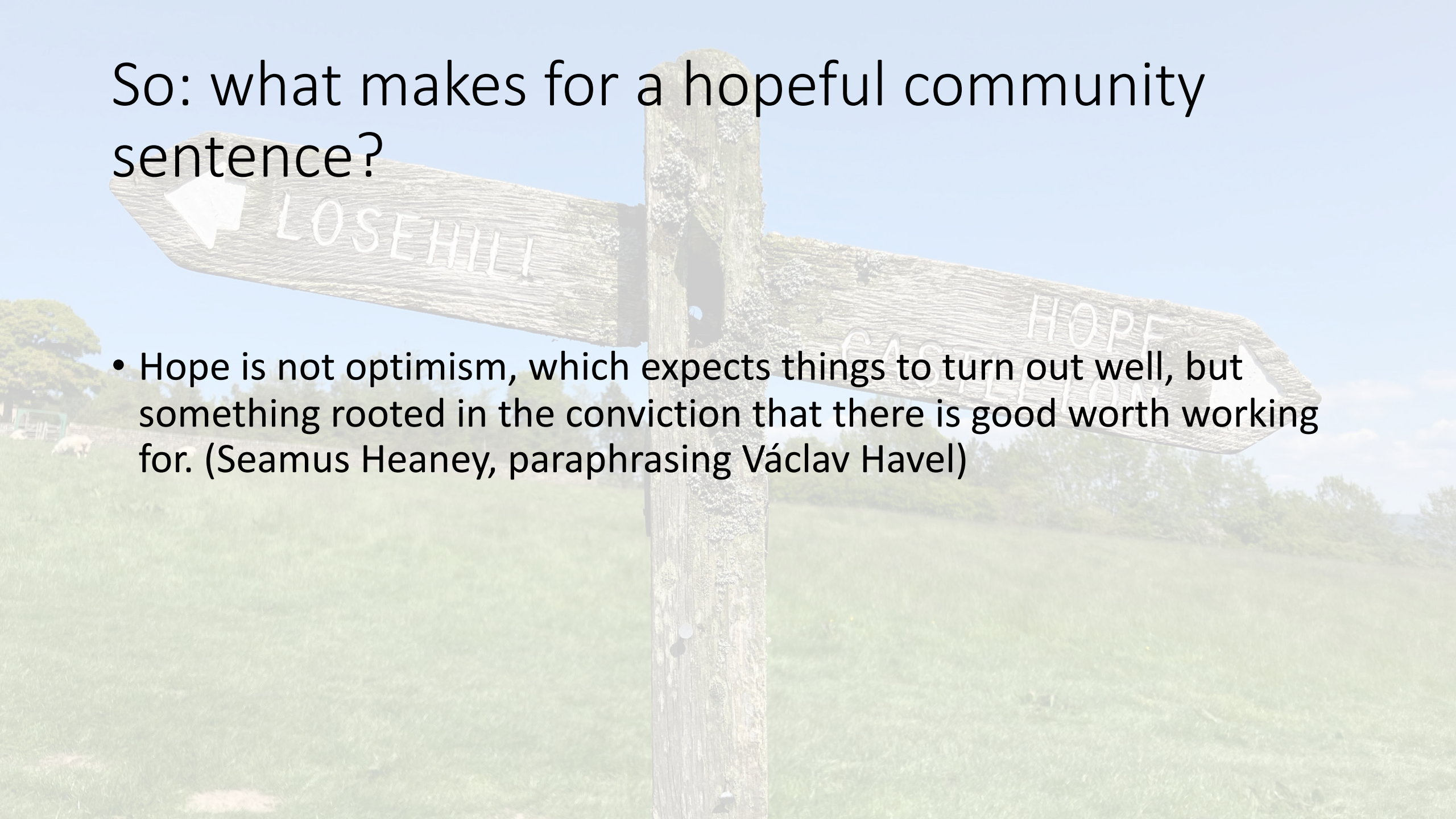
# Marketised and rationed rehabilitative services

- So when I worked with people initially, we had a range of resources that I could draw upon. I had my pocket guide of agencies that I could go to and then the *very competitive nature structurally around third sector organisations meant the most of them vanished or it was prescribed and then the targets came in and it became increasingly hard to offer people anything meaningful other than contact and human contact.*
- That they're not very helpful at all. In any way of your release other than managing your risk, looking out for whatever risk you are almost or it's proposed/present. And they do nothing else at all for you. They are no help considering they're a government body, no help with housing. They've got no weight trying to rehouse people or trying to push people who they suspect or class themselves as being vulnerable or high risk and they do nothing for you.



So: what makes for a hopeful community sentence?

- Hope is not optimism, which expects things to turn out well, but something rooted in the conviction that there is good worth working for. (Seamus Heaney, paraphrasing Václav Havel)





# Treat people as people

- She actually sat and asked me what I wanted and how I could use those probation hours to do something ... She *treated me like a human being* and she asked me what I wanted, what I was interested in.
- She had come to see me just before I got released from my last prison sentence, along with a lady from the Police who was my appointed offender manager. And they came together, you know, they *talked to me like a human being*. They sat and had a joke and a laugh with me and made it, that relaxed thing, albeit sitting in a little legal visit box in [prison]. But it was, I don't know. It was just, I don't know, You could you could tell that they cared.



# Build trust

- We need to have a probation service that is built on principles of relational practise that is really about yes, we need to manage the risk. But actually if you build relationships with people, if you get to understand them, they're more likely to open up to you. They're more likely to engage with you. So actually the management of risk comes alongside that because as you are developing with people you are kind of helping them to see that you - I know they don't like using the word care - but we should be caring about people. We're talking about some of the most traumatised, vulnerable individuals in our society.



# Co-produce

- I think putting some kind of plan together. Understanding what someone's hopes and dreams are, identifying what that looks like. And then perhaps even going away and coming back with some possible options a bit like a mentor, I guess they play less of a mentor role but I think if they could do that, that would be really helpful or at least guide someone to who they can speak with.
- You can work with very little and the really, really skilled practitioners will turn a little into a lot ... they just had a way that they would use the 'if you could change your world and have a magic, a magic change, what would it be?' But they did it in a way that wasn't patronising, but it engendered hope - I've had people that have come back from those sessions as their worker, you know, in terms of as their probation worker and then been able to do a lot of work because somebody managed to light a spark, which was something.
- I think a fundamental thing is if somebody's got a hope, you have to hope alongside them and you're sure as hell don't dash it because that's one of the most destructive things that you can do if you have somebody who's motivated and then sometimes inadvertently, you might squash the hope without even realising it. Sometimes it's about reframing so that it's more realistic.



# Deliver differently



- I think when you first come into a probation office, at least the one that I went into. It felt a bit like a police station, it should be a bit more warm and welcoming
- There's a hub that I've heard about in [city name], ... for people to engage in a more holistic way in terms of things that are going to look at life stuff and it's those organisations that, if they're given space to work alongside us, gives me hope that actually we can offer more to people. I've got hope because I've seen the positive steps in terms of taking a more psychologically informed approach to people, so we're recognising the importance of that and how to foster it.



# Structure strengths in

- A risk assessment has to identify the strengths, as it were, the positives and someone's life. That could be the thing that, yeah, that that could be preventing offending [keeping] them on the straight and narrow. Is it meaningful, when their life that needs to be built up, not "let's just keep going on about your reoffending" and you know obviously there has to be, but I think you know the ... the balance is not right. I think it's more focused on that [risk] than the positives were. The positives need highlighting and lifting up and if you keep talking about the offending, you just keep the labelling that person
- I think obviously understanding someone's strengths, making it strength based. Understand what they can/ can't do and working with them on that basis would be really helpful. Obviously there's a whole plethora of needs that somebody has when they first come out.



# Free up staff time and treat them well

- Trust your probation practitioners. Give them the powers to actually use their own judgment on what they need and what their service users need to make a difference. I think professional judgment seems to disappear and actually if you want a 'people focused' service, you've got to listen to your people and allow them the safety and the ability to do what is going to work. Not something from a pre-selected list of six options.
- We'd have Lots of staff. You'd probably have about 15 cases each, you'd have unlimited time to spend with that person. Risk assessments and all assessments would be streamlined.
- There's a 15-day turnover for the OASys I think that's a hindrance sometimes because you you want to learn



# Conclusion

- There was a lack of hope across participants
- But people on probation and people working in probation do have hopes
- A number of structural and cultural factors impede the facilitation of hopes
- A hopeful community sentence is one which helps people move from states of hopelessness or institutional hopefulness towards transformational hopefulness and having the conviction that there is good worth living for.