

AssetPlus and Desistance-Informed Practice in a Welsh Youth Offending Service

Summary Report: Key Findings and Implications for Practice

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1. Introduction

This draft report is based on an empirical qualitative research study in a Welsh youth offending service conducted over the period 2017-2018. The study had two related aims:

1. To explore the impact on local policy and practice of the implementation of a new assessment instrument, AssetPlus; and
2. To explore how a desistance-informed model of practice had been developed.

AssetPlus, it should be explained, was designed to promote and enhance desistance-informed practice. This is discussed in more detail in Section 2.

The draft Report summarises the wider background and context within which the shift in assessment and practice emerged, outlines the methodology followed, identifies the main findings, and explores the possible implications for future practice.

2. Background and Context of AssetPlus: Literature Review

2.1: Introduction:

This section summarises the background against which AssetPlus was introduced. Particular attention is given to the interpretation of research evidence and theoretical debate on the nature of youth offending. The precise features of AssetPlus have been outlined by the Youth Justice Board (2014) and will be familiar to managers and practitioners, as will the rationale for the replacement of Asset (Baker, 2014). It is, however, worth noting some of the key reasons cited for the shift in assessment practice.

1. *Emerging evidence* on the limitations of the risk and protective factor paradigm and the nature of youth offending. It was also noted that, ‘...there has been growing emphasis on the development of theory and practice models based around factors which increase the likelihood of young people desisting from offending’ (Youth Justice Board, 2014: 4).
2. *Changes in Policy* that required the incorporation of emerging areas for assessment: speech, language and communication needs; gang affiliation; and radicalisation.
3. *End to end working* required the integration of assessments in community and custodial settings.
4. *Design of assessment tools*. Asset was regarded as being cumbersome in design and duplicative in practice. Moreover, the relationship between assessment and intervention/risk management plans was poor. Asset had also been implicated in a number of deaths in custody
5. Finally, although there had been success in reducing the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system and young people in custody, there was need to improve performance in relation to complex cases within a context of diminishing resources.

Given the focus of this research project, it may be helpful to devote a little more attention to the debate surrounding the application of risk-focused and desistance-informed models of practice with children in conflict with the law.

2.2: Risk-Focused and Desistance-Informed Approaches to Youth Offending

The Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (Farrington, 2007), upon which Asset is based, was the dominant model of practice in youth justice from 1998 until the introduction of AssetPlus in 2016. Whilst the original longitudinal studies upon which the paradigm was based have undoubtedly yielded important insights into the profile of those who offend, the methodological basis of this work has been open to serious critical challenge (Case, 2007; Case & Haines, 2009; Haines & Case, 2015); not least in respect of hindsight bias, the conflation of correlations with causes, the accuracy of its predictive powers (Garside, 2009), and misplaced therapeutic optimism amongst some policy-makers and practitioners who

believed that early intervention almost invariably remedied the risk of further offending. The inherent 'risks' posed to young people by such risk-focused assessment instruments and system contact were also not taken into account fully. The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime of a cohort of 4,300 young people (McAra & McVie, 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2012, and 2016) highlights some of the risks presented by the institutional processes of both the welfare and criminal justice systems. Four key findings emerge from the Edinburgh data:

- Persistent serious offending is associated with victimisation (e.g., abuse and neglect), acute vulnerability and social adversity.
- Early identification of 'at risk' children is not an exact science. It also poses the risk of labelling and stigmatisation (thus increasing the risk of reoffending and criminalisation).
- Pathways into and out of offending are facilitated or impeded by 'critical moments' and 'key decisions' made by practitioners and others (e.g., social workers, teachers and parents).
- Diversionary strategies facilitate the desistance process.

Given that youthful offending is arguably normative – according to McAra (2018: 6) 96% of the Edinburgh Study reported the commission of at least one offence - asking why young people desist from offending rather than asking why they commence in the first place represents a potentially productive starting point (Sampson and Laub, 1992 and 1993). Consequently, the Desistance Paradigm (McNeill, 2006) represents a radically different approach and comprises a number of different elements. However, it should not be inferred from this that practitioner skills used to deliver rehabilitative programmes are without value or utility.

The age-crime curve is widely regarded as one of the established 'iron laws' of criminology: the onset of male offending beginning in the early teens, peaking in the late teens and early twenties, and declining sharply in the mid-late twenties (Farrington, 1986; Blumenstein and Cohen, 1987). By the age of thirty the overwhelming majority of males have desisted from offending. The correlation between age and offending, which along with gender is one of the key static factors in the Youth Offender Group Reconviction Score (YOGRS), describes rather than explains the phenomenon of offending and desistance. 'Growing out of crime' (Rutherford, 1992) is not straightforwardly about age or, for that matter, the maturation process.

There is debate in academic, policy and practitioner circles about what should be included in Desistance Theory. The important point to make is that desistance, in offending or any other behaviour considered problematic (e.g., alcohol misuse, smoking or an unhealthy diet), is conceptualised as a process rather than event or series of events. The trajectory of desistance

is also typically erratic rather than linear and is characterised by relapses. The role of the practitioner is one of facilitating and supporting the desistance process and helping the service user to maintain progress. The main argument within the emerging desistance paradigm (McNeill, 2006; Weaver and McNeill, 2010) is that supervisory practice should be about helping the individual identify and remove barriers to their own desistance. This, it is argued, can best be achieved via developing a skilled, empathic professional relationship utilising interpersonal and interviewing skills to assist and support the individual's attempts at desistance (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; McIvor and McNeill, 2007; Rex, 1999; Dowden and Andrews, 2004; Raynor *et al*, 2014; Ugwu-dike *et al*, 2018). In this way, the quality of a consistent relationship is central to success and McNeill *et al* (2012) argue that practice needs to work with a model of change that assists the individual to acquire motivation, skills (human capital) and opportunities (social capital). This implies that practitioners should act as motivational counsellors, educators for human capital and advocates for social capital. The argument is thus that assessment and supervision need to move from the identification of risks 'fixed' by programmes to the co-identification of strengths, the encouragement of pro-social bonds and support for the maintenance of motivation against the odds.

Desistance takes time, which implies that the measures of success have to be re-conceptualised and recalibrated. The stages of desistance are often referred to as *primary* and *secondary*, although more recently reference has also been made to a *tertiary* level (McNeill and Schinkel, 2016): *primary* describes behavioural change, *secondary* a radical change in identity, and *tertiary* a sense of belonging to the wider community. This account is consistent with the Good Lives Model (Ward and Brown, 2004), which argues that people – including offenders – seek to obtain primary and secondary social goods (such as a sense of belonging and friendship).

According to Maruna *et al* (2015) the research and theoretical literature on desistance can be organised under two main headings: *internal factors influencing desistance* and *social factors influencing desistance*. This representation of the literature is open to contestation and challenge, but it does have the virtue of assisting practitioners and managers to reflect clearly on how best to work with (i) individual young people and (ii) the wider social context they inhabit. Of course, a dynamic and interactive relationship exists between these two dimensions, but in terms of planning interventions, it perhaps helps to think in these terms. Summarised below are the key messages from the theoretical and research literature on desistance in these two areas.

2.3: Internal Factors Influencing Desistance

There are three main areas that need to be considered in relation to 'internal factors': maturation; trauma and adverse childhood experiences; and identity.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that maturation is a key element in the desistance process. Children and young people are still in the process of growing up; not only in biological terms, but also in respect of their developing intellectual, social, emotional and moral competencies. Child and adolescent development is a highly individualised process, mediated through the prism of social and cultural context. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that children do not have the same capacity to make fully informed or nuanced moral judgements in the same way as adults who have reached full maturity. While children are certainly not devoid of moral awareness, they may not always understand the wider practical and ethical implications of their behaviour (Coleman, 2011). Research on brain development during adolescence suggests that it is not until the early twenties that the process of maturation in neural circuitry is complete (Keating, 2004; Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Steinberg, 2007; Royal Society, 2011; Mackintosh, 2011; Delmage, 2013; Lamb & Sym, 2013). Technological developments in functional magnetic resonance imaging enable us to know more about the process of synaptic pruning that takes place in various parts of the adolescent brain as well as changes in the limbic system. The latest research suggests that the pre-frontal cortex, which is the main part of the brain responsible for cognitive functioning and impulse control, is one of the slowest to develop. Steinberg (2009) has highlighted the still developing capacity for consequential thinking (an area in which many offending behaviour programmes focus). Changes in the limbic system (which processes information that relates to emotion), meanwhile, may account for the strong mood swings often associated with adolescence.

Secondly, the point needs to be made that the maturation process does not take place in a social vacuum. In addition to the provision of basic human needs, the stimulus and support of a secure and emotionally warm environment are vitally important to the development of a young person. Conversely, abuse, adverse childhood experiences, neglect and poverty can have profoundly negative effects on the development of a child. It is against this background that interest in trauma-informed approaches to working with young people has grown (Skuse and Matthew, 2015), most notably in the youth justice context with the introduction of the Enhanced Case Management Model.

The third important area relates to identity formation and cognitive transformation. Narrative criminological explanations of desistance have been based mainly on retrospective accounts of adults reflecting on their journeys to non-offending lifestyles (Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Farrell, 2004; Maruna *et al*, 2004; Presser and Sandberg, 2015) as well as those sociological accounts on wider youth-to-adult transitions (Johnston *et al*, 2000; Chamberlayne *et al*, 2002; Webster *et al* 2004; Williamson, 2004; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Shildrick *et al* 2012a and 2012b). There has, however, been some research undertaken on accounts of children and young people involved in the youth justice system (see, for example, McMahon and Jump, 2018). Accounts of offending – or any other actions for that matter - can never be contemporaneous, of course; not least because, as Kierkegaard (1843/2000) observed:

‘It really is true what philosophy tells us; that life must be understood backwards. But with this, one forgets the second proposition, that it must be lived forwards.’

The narrative criminological approach embraces the Kierkegaardian paradox by simultaneously ‘looking back’ and ‘looking forwards’: making sense of the past and drawing lessons to inform plans for the future. However, it is not simply about formulating a list of behavioural modifications and planning objectives. The projected future must address two questions: ‘who do I want to be?’ and ‘how do I want to live?’ (Szifris, 2017). A central message of narrative criminology is that, notwithstanding the profound personal and social disadvantages that will have been experienced by most offenders, they do possess the personal agency and freedom to choose how they live their lives. The legacy of difficult childhoods, blocked opportunities and the weight of material and social constraints should of course be acknowledged. Nevertheless, if young people do not recognise they have the ability to make meaningful choices, they abandon hope of a future they can shape and as a consequence surrender themselves to the ‘destiny’ predicted by the risk factors of parenting and postcode (Brent, 2013). Believing that they have a measure of control over their own lives is a prerequisite of the narrative criminological approach. Empowerment of young people is therefore a key part of practice; in terms of helping young people access opportunities and in terms of assisting young people to believe they can change.

In terms of working with individual young people, there are three key elements that need to be highlighted: narratives and scripts (Maruna, 2001); identity (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009); and ‘hooks for change’ (Giordano, 2016).

‘Scripts’, an essential element in narrative work, comprise key stories and messages that individuals tell themselves. Early scripts are authored by parents, teachers and other significant events and will communicate ideas about who we are as individuals in terms values, expectations and roles. An important lesson in life is to realise that one can take control of one’s script and re-write it, often in defiance of the expectations of others. Most clients of the criminal justice system will have received what are described as *condemnation scripts*: condemned to fail at school, condemned to be poor and condemned to spend time in custodial institutions. However, the possibility of being the author of one’s own future involves drawing lessons from this original script and writing a *redemption script* in which one privileges positive prosocial messages. Individuals’ interpretations of their past and the narratives they construct are inevitably selective and usually self-serving. This is true of everyone: anyone who has written a *curriculum vitae* will know this to be true. The important point is that one draws the positives from one’s past (‘it’s probably not all been bad’), recognises those aspects of one’s past that one had little or no influence over (family problems, trauma, poverty, teachers with low expectations, etc.), acknowledges the bad choices one has made and contrasts these mistakes with how one seeks to move forward.

As has already been mentioned, it is not simply a case of formulating a set of personal objectives. There is also the nature of an identity that is neither predetermined nor fixed. There is an underpinning belief that people can change and choose to be different. In the literature (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009) there is reference to the 'working self' (the present) and the choice between the 'feared self' ('the sort of person I will probably become if I continue on the present trajectory') and the 'desired self' or 'replacement self' ('the sort of person I would ideally like to become') (Hunter and Farrell, 2018).

'Hooks for change' (Giordano, 2016) are usually required in order to effect a shift from a pattern of offending to desistance. Such 'hooks' describe the scaffolding to incentivise and support the desistance process. They may take the form of employment opportunities, a personal relationship or a consuming leisure interest. Crucially, though, these 'hooks' must be valued by the offender and the individual concerned must be emotionally and cognitively ready to take advantage of them (Hunter and Farrall, 2018). In the case of young people, of course, there is also the question of maturity. That said, the work of McMahon and Jump (2018) challenges the assumption that desistance in adolescence is unlikely. Positive work can be undertaken to support children in the desistance process. It is, though, important to recognise that the process of desistance is difficult and non-offending does not necessarily bring its own rewards. Offending can bring material rewards in an environment within which legitimate opportunity structures are either unavailable or very scarce. Offending can also be a source of friendship, validation and self-esteem. It therefore needs to be recognised that offending is often a rational response to limited opportunities within a challenging environment. Youth Offending Services should therefore pay attention to not only preparing the individual young person to take advantage of 'hooks for change' when they are presented, but also consider ways in which access to tangible opportunities can be both improved and created. This requires the development of networking and even entrepreneurial skills within Youth Offending Services.

2.4: Social Factors Influencing Desistance

The importance of close and secure social bonds has long been recognised in the literature. Three key dimensions of the desistance process have been identified: '...a good job; a good relationship; and involvement in prosocial hobbies and interests' (Maruna *et al*, 2015: 162). Moreover, the changing nature of youth-to-adult transitions since the 1970s has had a radical impact on the social conditions within which such bonds can be formed, especially for working class males (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; MacDonald, 2015). The transition from school to well remunerated unskilled or semi-skilled work in the labour market has all but collapsed as a direct result of macro-economic changes (from production and manufacturing to service industries). Areas such as the north-east of England, the South Wales valleys and certain neighbourhoods in large cities have been particularly badly affected by these economic changes. Concurrently, the move from living at home with one's family of origin to affordable

independent accommodation has become extremely challenging for most young people. As a result, establishing a 'family of destination' is also very difficult for young people today. It should be noted, too, that family structures are far more diverse than was the case in the 1970s, with lone parent and reconstituted families generally being poorer and less able to support their children financially. This is not to make a moral point, of course, but social policy has yet to catch up completely with these trends and social changes in family life. Given the protracted and fractured nature of youth-to-adult transitions, it is perhaps understandable that many working class young people in deprived areas struggle to imagine a future founded on legitimate employment. The competing opportunity structures of illicit and shadow economies are often far more accessible. It is equally understandable that youth offending services should struggle to know how best to respond to these significant structural challenges. However, if meaningful 'hooks for change' are to be created, then inroads need to be made in such areas as education, training, education, accommodation and leisure. In order for young people to change for the better, they require the prospect of material reward, validation, engagement with prosocial institutions and, above all, a sense of hope that things can get better.

The implications for practice are, to say the least, challenging. To some extent, it is a matter of placing greater strategic emphasis on existing practice partnerships and creating new ones when required. It involves being even more proactive in systems intervention and management in areas where young people could be better served: education, the Looked After Children system, mental health, income maintenance, accommodation and training. Employment and training are areas that may well require a strategic, innovative and entrepreneurial partnership approach. Granular data on the communities served by youth offending services are available (see section 3) and, with partners, should be analysed closely with a view to developing local strategies to promote social inclusion.

2.5: Desistance, AssetPlus and Key Messages for practice: some initial considerations

The implications for practice that emerge from the theoretical literature on desistance can be summarised in the following terms.

- A. Helping the individual young person to identify and remove barriers to their own desistance.
- B. The skilled practitioner should develop an empathic professional relationship utilising interpersonal and interviewing skills to assist and support the individual's attempts at desistance.
- C. The model of change adopted should be one that assists the individual to acquire and maintain motivation, learn and refine skills (human capital), and access opportunities (social capital).

- D. Practitioners should act as motivational counsellors, educators for human capital and advocates for social capital.
- E. Practitioners should be active in the removal of barriers to desistance and intervene in systems in order to promote positive outcomes for service users.

The joint probation and youth justice Inspectorate (HMIP) has, moreover, produced a document that brings together a summary of the desistance literature with empirical research on what young people have found useful and less useful about supervision. Youth Offending Services are exhorted to focus on eight 'domains' of practice (HMIP, 2016: 7):

1. Building professional relationships, effective engagement and re-engagement, and collaborative working.
2. Engagement with wider social contexts, especially the family, but also peers, schools, colleges, work, etc.
3. The active management of diversity needs.
4. Effectiveness in addressing key 'structural barriers' (exclusion from education, training or employment, lack of participation, lack of resources, substance misuse deficits, insufficiency of mental health services, etc.).
5. Creation of opportunities for change, participation and community integration
6. Motivating children and young people.
7. Addressing children and young people's sense of identity and self-worth.
8. Constructive use of restorative approaches.

The above key messages are duly revisited in Sections 4 and 5.

From their interviews with both 'desisters' and 'persisters', HMIP identified the following 'domains' as likely to promote desistance: a good relationship with at least one worker (not necessarily the case worker); meaningful personal relationships and belonging to a family; emotional support and practical help from a worker who clearly believed in their ability to change; the development of a strong personal relationship (with a partner) and/or becoming a parent; changing peers and friendships; interventions providing problem-solving solutions for day-to-day problems; and well-planned and relevant restorative justice. In contrast, the following were felt to be less useful: formal offending programmes not suited to their needs; poor relationships with case workers; frequent changes of case manager; identified needs not being addressed; a lack of genuine engagement with the case manager in the planning of intervention; and objectives that were not personally relevant being included in plans.

An inspection of Youth Offending Services based on these desistance principles concluded that whilst practice was often directed at developing effective relationships with young people and addressing some structural barriers to desistance, there was little evidence of systematic work in the remaining domains. Interviews with case managers revealed that few

had been trained in desistance theory or practice and that some conflated a desistance approach with existing risk and offence-focused work. Furthermore, case managers reported being under pressure from managers to produce evidence of 'work done' on offending and risk, rather than allowing the less prescribed building of relationships (HMIP 2016: 8).

The relationship between AssetPlus and desistance is clearly key to the ways in which practice might develop in future. According to the YJB, AssetPlus was introduced during 2015-16 to 'improve the quality of assessments and intervention plans' and to usher in a form of practice that 'incorporates areas of research such as desistance theory and the Good Lives Model' (YJB, 2016). More specifically, AssetPlus is intended to enable an assessment and planning process that is based upon: understanding young people's behaviour; understanding and using the concept of 'risk'; identifying strengths; understanding desistance and the process of change; and the involvement of young people and parents/carers (Baker, 2014).

Given the relatively recent introduction of AssetPlus, it is difficult to gauge its impact upon practice. However, an empirical study of YOS practice with early AssetPlus assessments (Hampson 2016) found that they tended to cover similar ground to those conducted using the previous Asset tool, with the emphasis on risks and offences rather than positives and opportunities for change. For Hampson, one of the reasons for this was the structure of AssetPlus itself, which she argued does not encourage 'desistance thinking'. Furthermore, Hampson (2018) takes the view that AssetPlus falls between the 'two stools' of desistance and risk-based thinking, with one major factor being the lack of any focus on the importance of building good relationships.

Moreover, in Hampson's (2018:10) sample of completed AssetPlus assessments, whilst AssetPlus does assess both positives and negatives in a young person's life, it was the latter that received more emphasis. Supervision plans failed to identify opportunities to develop social capital or relationships, but did consider the achievement of personal goals. Hampson considered that this failure to promote desistance-based practice derived from the combination of factors mentioned, but also from the unrealistic expectation that the introduction of a new tool could overcome nearly 20 years of practice based on risk; particularly as the risk paradigm had been led and 'enforced' from the top. She raised the question of other areas of the youth justice system, such as the courts, not being included in the introduction and training for AssetPlus but also highlighted significant inconsistencies in policy between the YJB and the Inspectorate at that time. The latter, after publishing its study and inspection of practice on desistance outlined above (HMIP 2016) went on to undertake 20 YOT inspections in 2017, which focused on risk and offending behaviour work (Hampson 2018: 13). These inspections still looked at binary re-offending statistics and failed to consider the role of practitioners in helping young people build revised positive personal narratives; both issues being fundamental within the desistance literature. In Hampson's view, this contradictory approach needed to be addressed as practitioners in her sample had a clear

preference for working with young people in a forward-looking and positive way and thus the introduction of a desistance-based approach should have been pushing at an open door (Hampson 2018: 14). Since the publication of Hampson's findings, it should be acknowledged that a new set of inspection standards are being developed. It is essential that these standards reflect and capture the shift in practice that, ostensibly at least, has been signalled.

3. Research Design and Methods

This study was conducted in a Welsh Youth Offending Service (YOS) located in a largely urban post-industrial area that, in common with many other parts of Wales, also exhibits features of rurality in terms of its transport links, public service infrastructure and dispersed centres of population. The YOS serves a significant number of low-income neighbourhoods that score highly on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, which measures deprivation in eight domains: income, employment, health, education, geographical access to services, community safety, physical environment and housing (WIMD, 2014). It is worth noting that the area concerned scores particularly highly in relation to child deprivation. The relevant report (Welsh Government/Statistics for Wales, 2014) calibrates such indicators as income, low birth weight, long-term illness, overcrowded households, education, and repeated school absenteeism. This challenging social context has a direct impact on many of the children with whom the YOS has contact. It is against this background that ethical and effective practice must be fashioned.

The overall design of the research project was a Single Case Study Design (Yin, 2009), with the YOS in question as the focus of the case. Case Study Design offered a suitable approach as the site selected is a broadly 'representative' or 'typical' institution that, along with other Youth Offending Services in England and Wales, has been required to implement a new assessment instrument and effect a significant change in a well-established paradigm of practice. Due to the concept of 'representativeness' being most closely associated with quantitative research, the term 'exemplifying case' (Bryman, 2016: 62) might be more appropriate. Case Study Designs are context-sensitive and can analyse shifts in local practice with reference to the wider policy environment as well as shared statutory and institutional frameworks. Thus, the youth offending service in this study operates within the same legal environment, possesses the same internal structure and is guided by the same policies as other Youth Offending Services in Wales.

As has been mentioned in the introduction, the research aims were twofold:

1. To explore the impact on local policy and practice of the implementation of a new assessment instrument, AssetPlus; and
2. To explore how a desistance-informed model of practice had been developed.

Four main methods were applied to address these questions:

1. **Case file (electronic) analysis** of thirty-two cases of children with YOS involvement: eight from Prevention; seven from Bureau; six Referral Orders; six Youth Rehabilitation Orders; and five Custody cases. The files included AssetPlus, case records, pre-sentence reports and other relevant documents. A purposive sampling

strategy was used, but the cases were selected by an operational manager who had an overview of the caseload distribution and case characteristics of the children. The aim was to provide a sample that was broadly representative. The case files were analysed in terms of the following: young persons' demographics; the reason for their involvement with the YOS; the use of AssetPlus or otherwise; the outcome of the assessment in terms of any detail of presenting risks, needs, and factors assisting or presenting barriers to desistance; individual motivation; the completion and content of intervention plans; evidence of a shared approach to assessment and planning; details of supervision and its relationship to plans; and evidence of a clear theoretical base.

2. Seven **semi-structured interviews (SSIs)** with YOS staff members (practitioners and managers) were conducted. Participants were self-selecting practitioners and operational managers and the findings presented here cannot be taken as being strictly representative of the wider youth offending service (let alone other Youth Offending Services). The SSIs were conducted using a range of questions relating to the main research questions (see Appendix for full details), but included the following areas: the purpose(s) and use of AssetPlus; how it differed from Asset; how young people had responded to AssetPlus; whether AssetPlus was appropriate with all young people within the youth justice system; respondents' views on desistance theory and the Good Lives Model (GLM), and how they might influence practice; and how respondents thought youth offending services should operate in an ideal situation. The latter question possesses an element of Utopian methodology and liberates participants to move beyond the constraints of existing context within which they work and reflect on what constitutes an ideal form of practice. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically with the support of the software package, NVivo.
3. Two **focus groups**. One of the focus groups comprised staff within the YOS prevention team, whilst the other drew upon staff with a range of roles. As has been mentioned, the SSIs were conducted using a range of questions relating to the main research questions; the focus groups, meanwhile, were asked to discuss a limited number of themes that had emerged from initial analysis of the SSIs and case files. A measure of methodological triangulation was thus achieved.
4. **Ethnography / Observation**. An important element of the research strategy involved the researchers embedding themselves within the YOS and interacting with staff informally. This included attending and observing selected staff meetings, team-training events on AssetPlus and Desistance Theory, and taking opportunities to chat with practitioners in corridors and kitchens. Notes of these interactions were duly recorded (on a non-attributable basis) and informed the analysis.

This study was conducted in accordance with the relevant research ethics codes and guidance (University of South Wales, British Society of Criminology, British Sociological Association and

the Social Research Association). Crucially, the details and identifying characteristics of research participants, including those represented in case files, have been cleansed from the data and are presented here in anonymised form.

The final stage of the research is to re-engage in an iterative process with managers and practitioners on the findings, themes and implications for policy and practice. There is clearly a need to test the validity of our findings against the current experience of those working in the field. Some time has elapsed since the initial fieldwork was conducted and there may have been adaptations and developments in practice in the intervening period that should be taken into account. The two sections that follow present the findings and implications for practice in a format that aims for concision and clarity. This form of presentation was also designed to facilitate the required discussion.

4. Research Findings and Themes

It is important to emphasise the point that this section is neither an evaluation nor inspection of the YOS in question. Rather, it attempts to capture and distil the experience of managers and practitioners in their response to the challenge of introducing a new assessment instrument that is ostensibly designed to assist a paradigmatic shift in practice. As researchers we are reassured that our findings generally resonate with those of Hampson (2018). This suggests that what has been experienced locally has been experienced elsewhere in Wales.

Summarised below are the key messages from the research on AssetPlus, desistance-informed practice and a few miscellaneous issues that are worthy of note.

- A. AssetPlus was reported as being ‘practitioner-unfriendly’, unwieldy, time-consuming and taking practitioners away from direct face-to-face work with children. References to ‘feeding the beast’ were mentioned on a number of occasions. In the *AssetPlus Rationale* document produced by the YJB (Baker, 2014:3) it is stated,

‘Assessment and intervention planning are demanding professional tasks requiring high levels of knowledge and skill. Structured assessment tools or frameworks can assist with these tasks but will be of most use if individual practitioners and organisations see them as supporting professional practice, rather than replacing it.’

At the time of the fieldwork, AssetPlus was regarded as more of an obstacle than aid to assessment and planning. However, this finding – whilst widespread – should be treated with a measure of caution as new assessment and planning instruments take time to be absorbed and embedded in mainstream practice. A more favourable view of AssetPlus may have developed in the intervening period. Nevertheless, it should be noted that both experienced and new practitioners (the latter not being in any way wedded to the old Asset forms) reported concerns that appeared to be more than mere ‘teething problems’ with AssetPlus.

- B. AssetPlus was reported as being ‘manager-unfriendly’. It was stated that it was difficult for managers to gain a quick overview of a case.
- C. Respondents saw the overall purpose of AssetPlus as to obtain ‘holistic assessments’. There were very few unprompted mentions of AssetPlus being a vehicle to promote a new way of working post-assessment.
- D. The main impact of AssetPlus was in its completion and role in assessment, rather than in terms of subsequent planning and intervention/working with young people and their families.

- E. AssetPlus makes little or no difference to children. They were not greatly involved in Asset and the same can be said of AssetPlus. AssetPlus is neither better nor worse in this regard.
- F. The AssetPlus 'Timelines' function was considered to be very useful for displaying periods of desistance and offending. It enabled practitioners to ask questions about what may have been 'going right' or 'going wrong' for young people at these times and thus provide possible ideas about how any such positive conditions might be reproduced in future.
- G. AssetPlus was good at reminding and encouraging practitioners to provide evidence of positives and strengths in children's lives. Some recognised that this also encouraged a focus on the future rather than the past. It was felt by some that the risk-focused approach tended to produce hindsight bias, which perhaps gave risk a privileged role in assessment. Nevertheless, the assessment and management of risk was still important and Asset did this better than AssetPlus.
- H. AssetPlus was regarded as largely inappropriate for Prevention cases.
- I. AssetPlus was regarded as largely inappropriate for most Bureau cases.
- J. Understanding of desistance theory appeared to be partial and selective (which, it should be mentioned, is also true amongst many members of academic and policy communities). The implications for practice had also not been worked out fully. There was a mixed reception to the introduction of desistance-informed practice. Some took the view that such practice was already well established and it was now simply a case of providing evidence of such work. There was recognition that practice should be more forward-looking and positive, paying less attention to deficit, risk-based approaches. Indeed, some respondents with longer service felt that practice had reflected desistance theory in the past, but had not used such terminology. Others did not like desistance theory and, indeed, thought its applicability to children was limited because young people often lacked the maturity to reflect on past behaviour. In many respects, the views of practitioners and managers reflect wider debates and misconceptions about desistance theory and its applications. This included some who believed that desistance theory was a counter-narrative to 'what works' approaches (a common misconception that exists beyond the domain of practice). There was positive feedback on the desistance training received (with which the researchers would agree), but some questioned its timing. Inevitably, perhaps, the main focus of practitioners and managers had been on the AssetPlus training.
- K. The twin purposes of (a) assessing and managing risk to the public and (b) facilitating and supporting desistance processes was a work in progress.
- L. Knowledge and understanding of the Good Lives Model was patchy and generally superficial.
- M. In written documentation, such as pre-sentence reports, risk-focused language was replaced with 'desistance-speak'. Thus, for example, reference was often simply made to 'desistance factors' instead of 'risk factors' or 'protective factors'; 'desistance

processes' were seldom mentioned. This is an important point as the desistance literature places great emphasis on desistance being a process.

- N. Concern was expressed that the new orthodoxy of desistance-informed practice (and in Wales the Enhanced Case Management Model) favoured by the Youth Justice Board had not yet been adopted fully by the Inspectorate. As has been mentioned, this is a work in progress at the Inspectorate. New inspection guidelines are expected imminently.
- O. Many key stakeholders (e.g., courts) and partners (children's services, health, etc.) do not understand the paradigmatic shift in practice represented by the adoption of desistance-informed practice. In some quarters, there is a degree of puzzlement about how youth offending services are now working.
- P. The eight domains of desistance-informed practice (HMIP, 2016: 7) were analysed in those case files relating to YRO and Custody. It is important to recognise that case files can never reflect fully the range and depth of quality of work that actually takes place. Having said that, there was evidence of active consideration being given to five of the eight domains in the cases analysed. Three areas did, however, seem to be comparatively neglected: the 'active management of diversity needs' (in terms of gender/masculinities, class, LAC, family structure and ethnicity); 'motivating children and young people' (e.g., future-focused work); and 'addressing children and young people's sense of identity and self-worth' (e.g., work around identity/future selves and narrative).
- Q. It is worth noting that of the eleven cases analysed in relation to YRO and Custody, seven were Care-experienced and one further case was current to Children's Services. It should also be mentioned that one young person on a Referral Order, out of a possible six, was Care-experienced.
- R. Restorative justice practice, as implemented on Referral Orders, appears to be rather formulaic, occasionally inappropriate and seemingly not aligned with principles of desistance.

The exercise in Utopian methodology, in which practitioners identified the ideal forms of practice they favoured, yielded some interesting results; many of which were consistent with - or complementary to - desistance-informed practice. Summarised below are the salient statements of ideal practice that were identified.

- A. Child-centred practice: in terms of children's rights, maturation process, etc.
- B. More time for direct, face-to-face contact in order to facilitate relationship-building. This included just 'hanging out' with young people in much the same way as youth workers do.
- C. More shared working rather than a case management model. This involved genuine shared working practices rather than an 'assess and refer' model. It was also recognised that practitioners inevitably leave. As such, it is important for young

people to know more than one practitioner in a YOS. Operating a Day Centre or drop-in model was mentioned.

- D. The decentralisation of youth justice related service delivery to local neighbourhoods was cited as good practice. It was considered that the use of non-stigmatising mainstream agencies and community spaces was also important. The background against this perspective derived from recognition of the trend in recent years of public services retreating from the areas that needed them most. There was therefore a pressing need to be present and available to service users in the community.
- E. Proactive systems management. Changing or tweaking the system was perceived as often being more important than changing the child. Key systems for proactive intervention included education, training, health and LAC.

5. Implications for Practice

Some of the implications for practice will be apparent from the previous sections. Further to this, youth offending services must ensure they can produce evidence of good practice in all eight domains of work identified by the HMIP (2016: 7). Summarised below are some specific recommendations that we would make. All require further discussion and development, and most imply the need for further training.

- I. The development of strategies and guidance on how to develop desistance-informed practice with young people in the following areas:
 - a. Identity, narrative and script-based work with children and young people.
 - b. Motivational work with young people
 - c. Educational work with young people in acquiring specific skills
 - d. Approaches to desistance-informed practice that take full account of diversity (gender, ethnicity, local factors, LAC status, etc.)
 - e. Pre-Sentence Report writing in relation to describing narratives of desistance.
 - f. Proactive and effective systems management approaches in the domains of education, training, employment, health, LAC and accommodation.
 - g. Mainstreaming young people into mainstream provision wherever possible.
 - h. Local child/service user participation.
- II. Light-touch assessments wherever possible and appropriate (e.g., already in progress in the Prevention team).
- III. A clear communication strategy on desistance-informed practice aimed at courts and agency partners.
- IV. Community work and engagement with other partners in local capacity building, including the development of local anti-poverty strategies, developing links to employment, etc.
- V. Ensuring that young people and their families are in receipt of all welfare rights benefits and entitlements.
- VI. Holding service providers to account when they fail to deliver services and rights-based entitlements to young people (see, for example, comments on Bureau below).
- VII. Diversion from the criminal justice system facilitates the desistance processes. It is important, however, that diversionary measures are constructive in those cases where children and their families are disengaged from services and resources. The Bureau should ensure it fulfils its original mission of connecting young people (and their families) to those universal entitlements set out in the Welsh Government's *Extending Entitlements Youth Policy* (National Assembly for Wales, 2000). All children should have access to the following as of right:
 - a. education, training and work experience – tailored to their needs;
 - b. basic skills which open doors to a full life and promote social inclusion;

- c. a wide and varied range of opportunities to participate in volunteering and active citizenship;
 - d. high quality, responsive and accessible services and facilities;
 - e. independent, specialist careers advice and guidance and student support and counselling services;
 - f. personal support and advice where and when needed and in appropriate formats – with clear ground rules on confidentiality;
 - g. advice on health, housing benefits and other issues provided in accessible and welcoming settings;
 - h. recreational and social opportunities in a safe and accessible environment;
 - i. sporting, artistic, musical and outdoor experiences to develop talent, broaden horizons and promote a rounded perspective including both national and international contexts;
 - j. and the right to be consulted, to participate in decision-making and to be heard, on all matters which concern them or have an impact on their lives.
- VIII. Restorative Justice interventions that are meaningful, appropriate and aligned with principles of desistance-informed practice.

6. Conclusion

This Report sets out the key messages that emerge from the research study and outline some of the main implications for practice. As researchers we look forward to discussing with staff these preliminary findings and recommendations in greater depth.

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8. Appendices

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: Case Managers / Practitioners

- 1) What do you think are the purposes of Asset+?
- 2) How do these differ from the previous Asset system?
- 3) Please give examples from practice that illustrate differences between the two systems
(Possible supplementary question about PSR/court reports if not mentioned by interviewee).
- 4) Please give other examples from your own practice about how Asset+ has influenced the way you work with young people
(Possible supplementary questions to CMs who work with cases at different stages of the YJ process, e.g. Bureau and YRO etc. Can you apply desistance in the same way at various stages of the YJS?).
- 5) How have young people responded to an Asset+ assessment?
- 6) Has this differed from their response to Asset?
- 7) Do you think Asset+ is suitable for all young people involved with YOS?
- 8) How do you understand the principles of desistance theories?
- 9) If the YOS practiced according to desistance theories, what would that practice look like?
(Possible supplementary questions about whether desistance does/does not fit with particular stages in the YJ process and particular interventions, e.g. within the Bureau process, within RJ or ISS etc.).
- 10) How do you understand the principles of the Good Lives Model?
- 11) If the YOS were able to implement the GLM, what would practice look like?
- 12) If the YOS was working in the best way you can imagine, what would its practice look like and what theories/ideas/principles would this be based upon?
(Possible supplementary questions about their preferred theoretical approach. Are they eclectic, in favour of a risk-based, offence-focussed approach, open to desistance?)

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: Operational Managers

- 1) What do you think are the purposes of Asset+?
- 2) How do these differ from the previous Asset system?
- 3) Please give examples from practice (either your own or that of your team) that illustrate differences between the two systems
(Possible supplementary question about PSR/court reports if not mentioned by interviewee).
- 4) Please give other examples from your own/your team's practice about how Asset+ has influenced the way you work with young people.
(Possible supplementary questions about cases at different stages of the YJ process, e.g. Bureau and YRO etc. Can you apply desistance in the same way at various stages of the YJS?).
- 5) How have young people responded to an Asset+ assessment?

- 6) Has this differed from their response to Asset?
- 7) Do you think Asset+ is suitable for all young people involved with YOS?
- 8) How do you understand the principles of desistance theories?
- 9) If the YOS practiced according to desistance theories, what would that practice look like?
(Possible supplementary questions about whether desistance does/does not fit with particular stages in the YJ process and particular interventions, e.g. within the Bureau process, within RJ or ISS etc.).
- 10) How do you understand the principles of the Good Lives Model?
- 11) If the YOS were able to implement the GLM, what would practice look like?
- 12) If the YOS was working in the best way you can imagine, what would its practice look like and what theories/ideas/principles would this be based upon?
(Possible supplementary questions about their preferred theoretical approach. Are they eclectic, in favour of a risk-based, offence-focussed approach, open to desistance?)

File Reading Instrument

Overview

File identifier	
Age of young person	
Gender	
Reason for current involvement with YOS	
Legal basis of involvement and current stage of Order (continuing/completed/revoked/in breach etc.)	

Assessment

Was Asset + completed?	
Was the family, educational, social, economic and criminal background of the young person made clear?	
What was the outcome of the assessment in terms of any assessment of risk?	
What was the outcome of the assessment in terms of any assessment of need?	
What was the outcome of the assessment in terms of 'desistance' principles, i.e. co-assessing with the young person where they 'are at' in terms of their behaviour, the level of their commitment to desist, the identity of any barriers to desistance and the existence of any	

plans/proposals as to how to overcome such barriers?	
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Pre-Sentence Reports

Date of PSR – pre- or post- Asset+?	
How were issues of risk and needs presented within the report?	
What sort of language was employed?	
Was the young person ‘presented’ to the court in terms of posing future risks or was there an outline of positives and possibilities for desistance?	
Is it possible to discern theoretical underpinnings for these presentations?	
What sort of intervention was presented to the court as a proposal?	
What appeared to be the theoretical underpinnings of any such proposal?	
What sentence was imposed by the court?	

Supervision Plan

<p>What was the content of current supervision plan (at the time of file read)?</p> <p>Evidence of:</p> <p>Clear planning?</p> <p>Awareness of diversity issues/</p> <p>Opportunities to engage in community?</p> <p>Restorative activities?</p> <p>All interventions being personalised?</p> <p>All interventions age appropriate?</p>	
Is it possible to glean the extent to which the young person did/did not contribute to the supervision plan?	
<p>Is it possible to glean the underlying theoretical basis for any assessment and intervention, giving examples?</p> <p>E.g.:</p> <p>Desistance</p> <p>GLM</p> <p>RFPP</p>	

Supervision/Intervention

What could be gleaned from the content of supervision/intervention? I.e. was it focused on the young person, on their risk, on their needs, to what degree do they appear to have been held	
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<p>'responsible' for their behaviour, to what degree were 'external factors' seen to be influential in their behaviour?</p> <p>Were positives acknowledged and worked with?</p>	
<p>Was intervention reactive or planned and proactive?</p> <p>Was it planned to help remove barriers to desistance?</p> <p>Was it narrowly RF or offending focused (deficit model)?</p> <p>Was it based in positives/strengths?</p>	
<p>Did intervention involve external agencies?</p>	
<p>To what extent did supervision/intervention reflect assessments within Asset/Asset+ and the PSR (see above)?</p>	
<p>What was the young person's level of 'compliance' with the intervention? Was there evidence of proactive methods to encourage engagement/re-engagement?</p>	

Any other comments?

<p>Was there evidence of an awareness and working with the '8 domains of desistance' (HMIP 2016)?</p> <p>What evidence was there of a desistance based model of change (McNeill et al 2012) i.e. motivation, skills (human capital) and opportunities (social capital)?</p>

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