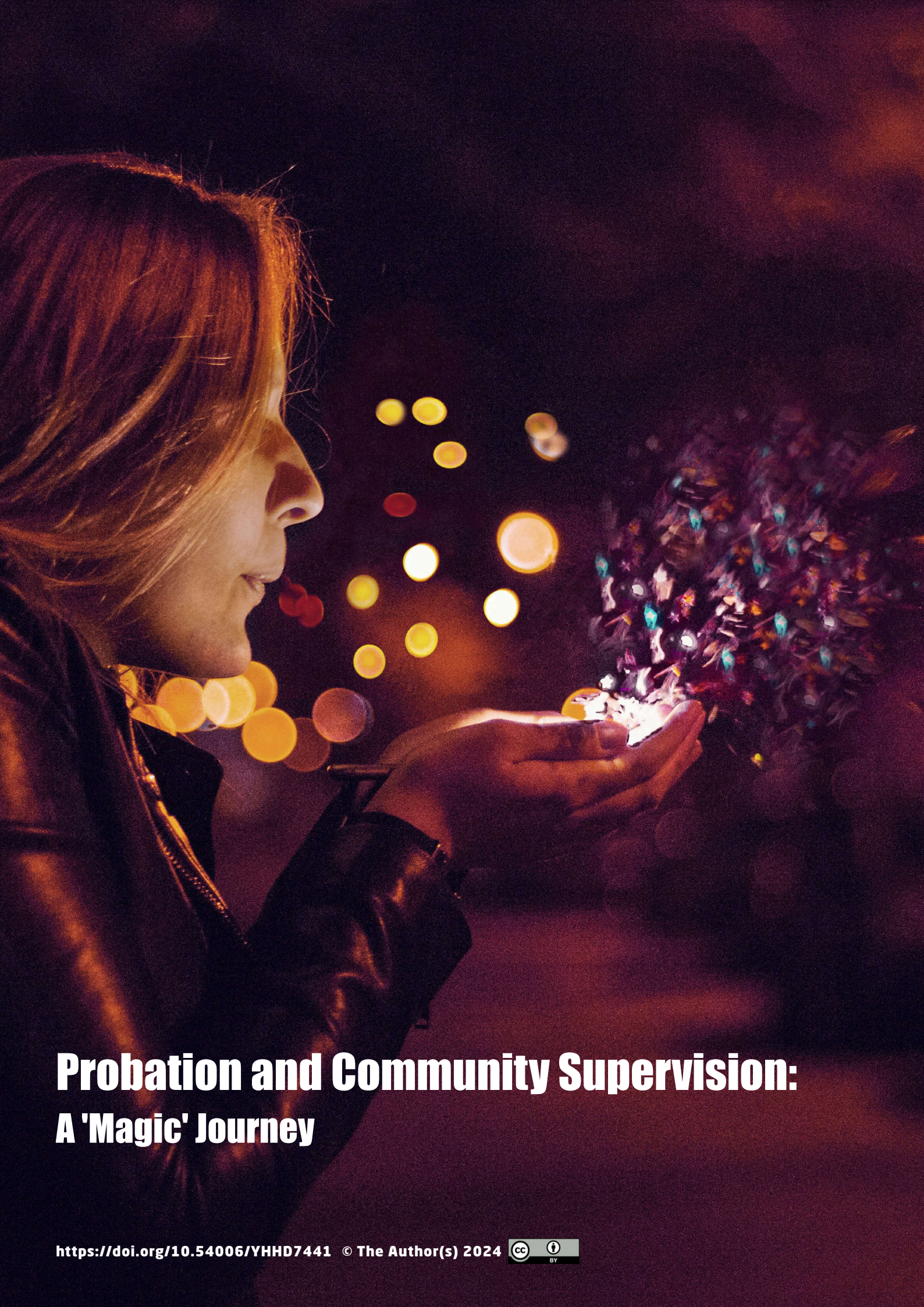

Probation and Community Supervision:
A 'Magic' Journey

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A good starting point to explain why I feel I have an informed opinion about probation and community supervision begins with my history and what brought me to a career as a supervisory practitioner in the Probation Service. I grew up in and around inner cities, and as with many places, there were varying experiences and influences. The reality was that crime, deprivation, disadvantage, and adversity were apparent. Still, there were opportunities, and positive influences from family, friends and existing or future graduates, professionals, community leaders, and so forth. I found that life was partly about choices and opportunities, and at times, we all navigate complex situations and circumstances. I think that when I learnt to do this for myself, I fell into a career in which I could help others to do this too. Subsequently, I trained as a probation officer approximately 21 years ago, so my HMPPS Long Service Medal is well overdue!

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The work we do as probation practitioners relies on the belief that people can change and requires the building of good working relationships with people on probation. The probation supervision setting can provide a vital opportunity for individuals to be supported to identify, pursue, and review necessary or desired changes in their lives (Rex, 1999; Ministry of Justice, 2012). As a probation officer, I've seen first-hand what helps people to move away from offending and to change their lives for the better. I have learned that past behaviour is not the only predictor of future behaviour, because it is important to recognise current behaviour and future potential too (Hylton, 2014). Sometimes there isn't any immediately observable or measurable success, and sometimes individuals reoffend. This is because changing behaviour and overcoming problems is rarely a straightforward development, where problematic behaviours and circumstances suddenly stop, and positive or desired ones will instantaneously follow (Hylton, 2015).

The key drivers of offending are yet to be fully understood at the individual level, as are the types of interventions that could be most effective (Home Office, 2018). Many will desist from offending after identifying or making changes which enable them to establish a position of stability, safety, and the building of social capital, therefore helping them to legitimately connect and reconnect with society (McNeill, 2006; Weaver and McNeill, 2007; Home Office, 2018). This can include personal, circumstantial, and situational factors such as maturity, education, homelessness, unemployment, finance, debt, mental health, addictions, relationships, and other factors that can be supported in principle (May, 1999).

Findings suggest that individuals supported by tailored interventions and access to specific services can be assisted to improve circumstances through professionals building open, trusting, and consistent relationships with them (Rex, 1999; Phillips et al, 2024). I'd like to see more of this 'wrapping a package around the person', and the development of collaborative supervisory and inter-agency approaches to meet needs, address risks and support desistance.

On Probation

A former Regional Probation Director (Steve Johnson-Proctor) once said,

> *"Never forget that the greatest source of support for any Probation worker is to be found in the enormous knowledge base of their colleagues' shared experiences".*

Accordingly, to draw attention to the importance of supervisory probation practices and the impact they can have in supporting individuals and reducing reoffending, I've shared some examples of experiences working in supervisory settings, with a range of supervised individuals who have exhibited a variety of behaviours including serious violence, group offending and recidivism. These experiences have been anonymised, and their inclusion is undoubtedly selective, in accordance with my more memorable experiences, of which there are many.

Supervisee 1 was one of my earlier supervisory experiences, an older individual with a history of anti-social behaviour and a pattern of assaulting public-sector workers. I knew much of the theory but sat thinking about what to say to this person who, I assumed was different to me in so many ways. Yet, I found we were not that different. We spent weekly supervision meetings over the next year talking about their anger and behaviour triggers. I had learnt techniques from rehabilitation programmes and had access to an independent anger counsellor. I used the concepts in individual supervision sessions, 'red flags, green flags', 'perspective taking', 'anger cues', and 'fact, opinion, guess'. My learning was to try simple methods, like talking and listening about the thoughts and feelings underlying the offending behaviour. This enabled the introduction of strategies they could use to calm and reinterpret emerging frustrations, rather than reacting aggressively to them. Positively, the Supervisee became increasingly motivated to talk through situations they had encountered and avoided.

Supervisee 2 left school at an early age and had endured transient accommodation since their early teens. They had moved away from offending as they felt they were "too old", had cut ties with former associates, were supported to improve their educational skills, and later helped into mentoring and employment. When exploring their motivations through one-to-one programmes focused on attitudes, thinking and behaviour, they eventually shared that 'lightbulb' moment and explained, "after I was stabbed, I couldn't defend myself anymore. I had to learn to use my head and talk myself out of problems. I'm good at it now, I've a job and a home [and most positively] soon I'll be doing your job". Through talking we were able to ascertain that at the route of this desistance journey was a desire to 'stay alive' and be received back into their family network with trust and respect. The Supervisee certainly had my respect, and it would be a pleasure to one day find them working as a probation practitioner.

Supervisee 3 had in the past been loosely connected to various offending groups (gangs) and attributed their offending to being in the wrong place, lack of money, falling out with family and homelessness. The factors they explained as helping them to move away from offending, were having a stable partner, becoming a parent, and completing a vocational qualification in prison. The Supervisee was positive about completing the qualification, as this had led to a job and legitimate income quite soon after release. At the end of the supervision period, the Supervisee expressed their appreciation for "keeping them motivated, believing in them and encouraging them to do better". This reiterates the importance of probation practitioners building good working relationships with people on probation, as this can be a motivating factor in changing behaviour and reducing reoffending.

Supervisee 4 was a young drug user with significant health problems. We arranged their supervision and drug service appointments on the same day to support them in engaging. We always met outside because they refused to enter the building for fear of being 'set up'. Every week we'd walk up the High Street to drug services which they only did because we'd pass McDonald's and I'd buy the Supervisee chicken nuggets. My manager had a fund put aside for this as it was the only way we could get them to engage. My learning with this Supervisee was simply that, sometimes just showing humanity works (and ditching pre-prepared supervision plans). The goal was to motivate the Supervisee to consistently engage with services to primarily address their drug use. After the supervision ended, I'd bump into the Supervisee from time to time and they'd update me on their progress and ongoing relationship with drug services, which always reiterated the value of the relationship I managed to develop through taking this less prescriptive approach to their supervision.

Supervisee 5 distrusted the police, probation, and the mental health team, and was vocal about this. We overcame this through regular joint meetings with all supporting agencies, during which we just let the Supervisee speak. After about 3 months we had built trust and eventually, we got to a place where we could say "let's try it this way", and they'd listen. That's how we helped the Supervisee engage, reconnect with family, keep a home, and improve independence. The power of communication and taking the time to develop the relationship was essential to the success of this Supervisee.

Supervisee 6 counted their sentence in football World Cups, so when imprisoned for somewhere in the region of 12 years, they were like, 'boom, 3 World Cups and I'm free'. We once spoke about how they could have made better choices at an earlier stage and they opened up about their journey. At the end, they got up and said, 'scrap that, I wouldn't change a thing, I'd have 'grafted' more and invested it all in Bitcoin but wouldn't have committed that last offence'. It wasn't exactly what I expected, but they were reflecting, showing remorse, and expressing they could have done things differently which is at times all we can ask for as probation practitioners.

Supervisee 7 is my most memorable story and concerns a young person I worked with through their time in prison, back into the community, the family home, and into college, all while struggling to keep away from negative peers. I remember shortly before the end of the supervision period the Supervisee got into university and dropped in to share the news. When I congratulated the Supervisee for what they had achieved, they said, "We did it together". In truth, I did very little and for me, this is what probation and community supervision work is about, helping and overseeing people lead and change their lives for the better.

The Overall Message

There is no *'magic ingredient'* to these stories of rehabilitation and change, a question a Justice Minister once asked me. The real explanation is in the commitment of supervised individuals in pursuing and achieving progressive life changes, and the dedication of the professionals within probation and community services working together to support them.

The importance of the supervision session and investing in developing practitioner skills and availability, including the empowerment to be creative, autonomous, and flexible alongside access to suitable resources, is key to the effectiveness of rehabilitation approaches. This could be further explored through the continuous focus on understanding and improving what is achieved within the 'black box' of probation supervision and the wide-ranging roles of supervisory practitioners (Hylton, 2015; Raynor, 2019).

The way forward in shaping wider solutions for probation strategies to improve re-entry, resettlement, and rehabilitation should come from frontline supervisory practitioners and those successfully ceasing offending and completing periods of supervision. With the right conditions, the people in prison and on probation today can and do become the professionals and leaders of tomorrow. Therefore, future justice policies must benefit from incorporating input from those currently in prison and on probation with positive messages against the negative forms of behaviours and lifestyles of which they were formally part. (Hylton, 2014; Weaver and McNeill, 2007).

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