Is private-sector innovation still vital to tackle support gaps for those leaving custody?

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https://doi.org/10.54006/HZQR4962
When the Government announced that offender management and all associated rehabilitation work were returning to the National Probation Service, the timing was a surprise as the country was in the depths of the pandemic.

The Seetec Group had garnered significant expertise running Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) in the South East and South West. Suddenly, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, we had one year to safely transfer some 20,000 service users, the associated data, and more than 1,000 probation staff to the new Probation Service.

Our leadership team firmly believed that, with the experience we had gained, the achievements we had made and the partnerships we had forged to support individuals and communities, we – as a private provider – still had a vital role to play.

Thus, one year ago, we launched Interventions Alliance with a clear goal: to help build better futures by addressing the challenges and barriers which hold people back - bridging the gap between criminal justice and social care.

One of our first opportunities arose in Bristol, when we identified a building in which we could develop a specialist residential unit for women coming out of custody or subject to a community order with a residence requirement, many of whom were homeless with complex needs and requiring high levels of supervision.

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Eden House opened in June 2021 and was the first new independent approved premises for custody leavers and community orders to open in England and Wales for 33 years. This was one of the proudest moments of my career and proof of the business’s ability to identify and meet unmet needs.

Providing accommodation services for those with complex needs was a completely new area for us and one we now hope to continue to expand and develop.

Eden House has supported 86 residents since it opened. The women who are referred by a probation practitioner are medium to high-risk, and require the additional support and oversight that Eden House provides. The women have access to interventions supporting behaviour changes, health and wellbeing as well as access to CFO Activity Hubs.

**What else are we doing?**

Interventions Alliance took on the Seetec Group’s Co-Financing Organisation (CFO) contracts to provide Activity Hubs for individuals on their rehabilitation journey in the North West, South East and South West, opening Hubs in Chatham, Hastings, Bristol, Manchester, Liverpool and Warrington. These provide a wide range of support and services from skills training to employment support.

We identified that substance misuse is a significant barrier for many of those we seek to support. We reconfigured the resource we had to better fit the demand and deployed a specialist team of substance misuse workers to address this need.

Our close relationships with Kent, Surrey and Sussex police services have seen us continuing to work with them to address domestic abuse and a particularly challenging area, stalking behaviour. We have led development of an intervention model, the only one approved by the British Psychological Society. Around half of convicted stalkers will reoffend and our Compulsive Obsessive Behaviour Intervention (COBI) examines triggers and behaviours that heighten the risk, while helping the individual to develop coping mechanisms and new skills to break the cycle.

Alongside service delivery, we are developing our research capability, focusing on an evidence-led approach to improving services, tackling offending and the common social care challenges that hold people back.

These areas demonstrate some of the agility and flexibility provided by private-sector organisations like Interventions Alliance, which has supported over 11,000 service users over the past 12 months.
What does the future hold?

As Interventions Alliance enters its second year, being part of the employee-owned Seetec Group gives us a great platform to take a holistic approach. Our work supporting individuals with mental health issues is not focused solely on those leaving the criminal justice system, it is equally important to our employability and skills services.

Being employee-owned strengthens collaborative working between different areas of the business and between employees and management, so those on the ground feel empowered to create agile and responsive solutions which benefit service users. It means the design of new services is well informed by those working with the most vulnerable people in society and, with the elected Employee Council influencing strategy and direction, approval can be achieved more rapidly.

For the future, we are looking to further increase our support for those with complex accommodation needs. Individuals leaving custody often need specialised mental health and substance misuse services, we know NHS services face record demands and have long waiting lists. We are well placed to relieve some of this pressure by supporting this cohort.

The challenges ahead

The need for support services to help rehabilitate those in the justice system is greater than ever. The Probation Service has faced a massive challenge over the past year in taking back offender management services.

It will be some time before it can begin to fully understand the gaps in provision and what services it needs to commission. But organisations like us can identify and respond quickly with new services to plug those gaps. There is a real opportunity for private providers like ourselves to work alongside the National Probation Service, offering complementary services and enhancing support to individuals where it is most needed. I think the focus of our relationship needs to be less about control and more about collaboration and learning for others, and collaboration is certainly the best way forward. The agility and innovation that a mixed economy approach can provide really is vital in ensuring offenders do not fall back into the criminal justice system through the gaps.

We welcome the publication earlier this year of the full prospectus for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which replaces European Social Fund provision. Funding will be key to unlocking the potential of the private sector to deliver effective interventions that help to reduce re-offending and reduce inequalities between communities as part of the government’s levelling-up agenda.