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PROBATION Quarterly

Issue 29: September 2023

"It takes a village"

The social fabric of recovery & desistance

HMP Belmarsh - Real voices from Category A young adults
Insights from Bird Podcast

Memoirs of probation
A personal story

An interview with Rob Canton
Patron of the Probation Institute

Probation Institute

PROBATION Quarterly

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WHAT'S INSIDE

SUBMIT AN ARTICLE FOR THE NEXT EDITION OF THE PQ?

Probation Quarterly publishes short articles of 500 - 1500 words which are of interest to practitioners and researchers in public, private or voluntary sector work with people on probation and victims. These articles can be about:

- the activities of the Probation Institute.
- news about the work of your organisation or project.
- reports from special events, seminars, meetings or conferences.
- summaries of your own completed research. (Note: we do not publish requests for research participants)
- brief reviews of books or research reports that have caught your eye.
- thought pieces where you can reflect on an issue that concerns you.

The articles need to be well-written, informative and engaging but don't need to meet the academic standards for a peer-reviewed journal. The editorial touch is 'light' and we can help you to develop your article if that is appropriate. If you have an idea for a suitable article, let me know what you have in mind and I can advise you on how to proceed. Please also read our language policy which asks all contributors to avoid stigmatising language.

Disclaimer
All contributors must adhere to the Probation Institute Code of Ethics but the views expressed are their own and not necessarily those of the Probation Institute.

Jake Phillips
Editor, Probation Quarterly

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Welcome to Probation Quarterly Issue 29

Jake Phillips
Editor, Probation Quarterly

Editorial: A dismal summer for probation?

https://doi.org/10.54006/YBKR8638

Since my previous editorial in June, there seems to have been a slew of bad news for probation in England and Wales. Numerous HMI Probation inspection reports have highlighted poor quality practice. A quick scan of reports published since June suggests that the key issues facing probation are – still - recruitment and training and supporting new staff. Creating a coherent culture out of two organisations (CRCs and the NPS) is proving to pose significant challenges for services, most likely compounded by low staffing levels and high levels of sickness absence. The legacy of the disaster that was TR lives on.

More positively, HMI Probation research identifies a positive correlation between high quality supervision (as defined by their standards) and early outcomes and progress for people under probation supervision. There is not enough in here to suggest causation and how these early outcomes then shape reduced reoffending and desistance in the longer term remains unknown. However, this innovative way of using inspection data to deepen our understanding of how to create pathways to more fulfilling lives for people on probation is to be welcomed and I look forward to seeing subsequent publications on this theme in the future.

In this issue I am delighted to include a range of articles from people with lived experience of probation, practitioners, academics and organisations working in the criminal justice sector. Two themes cut through this issue: the importance of higher education; and the value of providing first-hand accounts of desistance, imprisonment, risk assessments and other difficult to capture but critical aspects of the probation experience. PQ29 starts with an interview with Professor Rob Canton who was appointed patron of the Probation Institute earlier this year. Rob's insights into probation and what it can offer people in terms of a career are – as always – excellently made and his identification of key challenges is relevant to everyone who has an interest in the field of probation. Max Dennehy then reflects on his experience of desistance and relates it to what we know about desistance and recovery in the academic literature. His call for 'recovery ready' communities should be heard by all. Eve Mullins and Steve Kirkwood's article explores the ways in which desistance narratives are constructed by people both working and participating in group work in Scotland. We then hear from colleagues at Portsmouth University and their research into the use of 'XR technology' in the training of probation officers. Marj Rogers provides us with a summary of her research into the experiences of black, Asian and minority ethnic residents in Approved Premises – an example of research which targets two under-researched areas of probation: racial inequality and Approved Premises.

Dave Honeywell is a lecturer at Arden university who has recently published a book about his experiences of desistance – in his article in PQ he reflects on his experiences of probation and the role probation practitioners played in his desistance journey. Bird Podcast investigates what it means to do time in the UK prison system and in this issue of PQ I am pleased to include a summary of a recent episode in which they spoke to young adults in Belmarsh prison about their experiences of prison. Finally, colleagues from Liverpool John Moore's University provide a summary of their evaluation of the Beyond the Gate magazine which aims to raise awareness of organisations/services that link into resettlement and publishes real resettlement experiences/ stories to inspire individuals within prison.

As ever, I hope you enjoy the articles in this issue and please do get in touch should you wish to discuss writing an article for Probation Quarterly.

What's going on at the Probation Institute?

Helen Schofield
Chief Executive
Probation Institute

We are delighted to be able to publish two Sir Graham Smith Research Scheme reports:

- 'Exploring Probation practitioners transition to the new unified service' by Kyle Hart '

  and

- "A qualitative exploration of factors which influence rapport between participants and facilitators of Building Better Relationship" by Fliss Holmes.

We will be launching these two excellent reports on 30th October at an event online for one hour at 12.30pm. Look out for the details on our website and on LinkedIn.

We'll also be launching the 2024 round of the Sir Graham Smith Research Awards. If you are interested in opportunities for short, practice based reports do look at the scheme on our website and join the launch event on 30th October. The scheme is open to all members of the Probation Institute and of course by no means exclusive to probation.

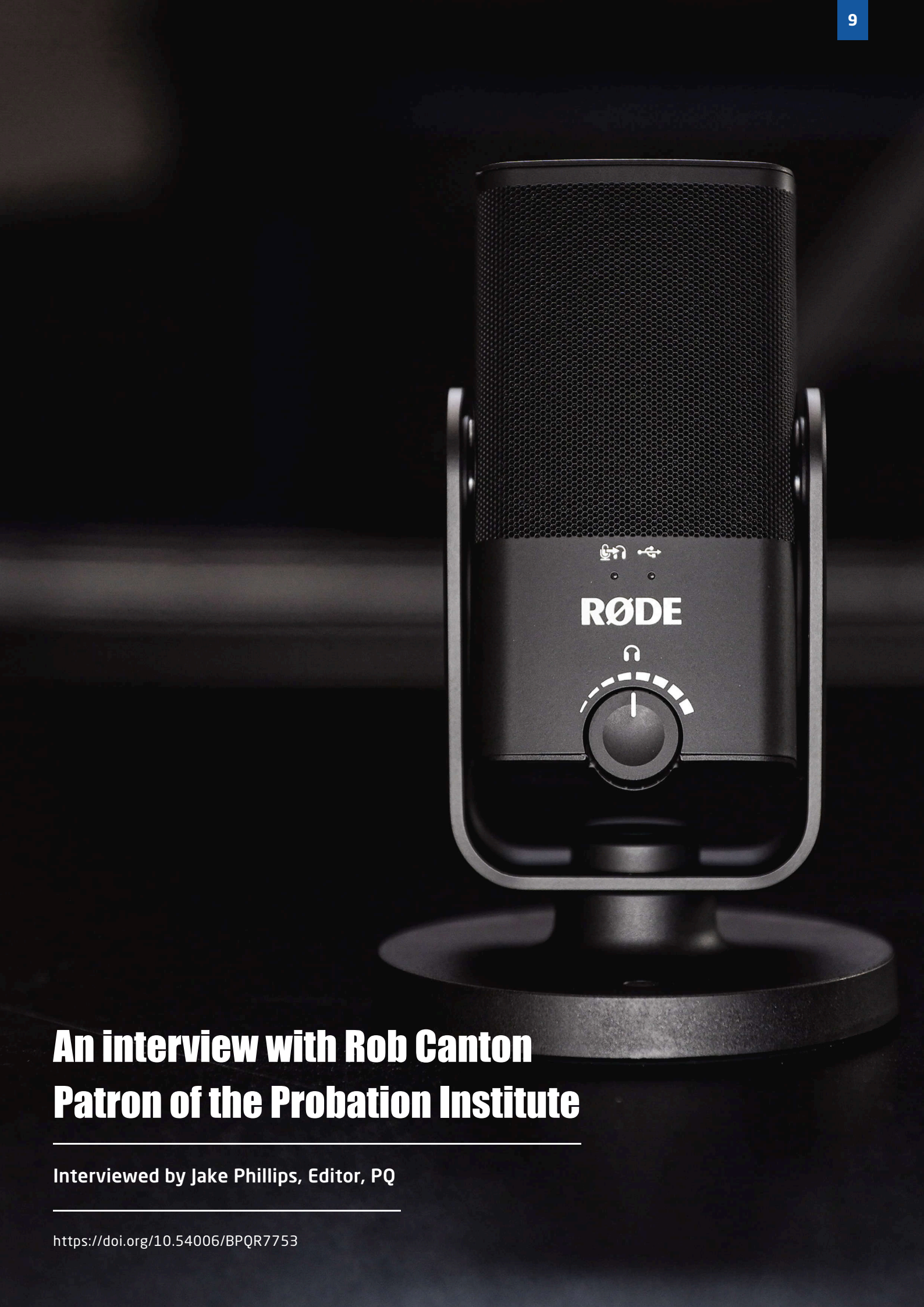
Dr Jane Dominey is standing down as Chair of our Research Committee. Jane has built up a strong committee working with our Trustees and the Chief Executive, and together they introduced and orchestrated a series of Research Events and steered the Sir Graham Smith Awards Scheme.

We would like to formally thank Jane for her very much appreciated work in this role. We are keen to appoint a new Chair of this group. If this opportunity is of interest, we would like to hear from you. Please let us know by emailing admin@probation-institute.org

We are very interested in the progress of the new internal register for Probation practitioners introduced by HMPPS. Readers will know that we strongly prefer the model of an independent, external regulatory body to accredit practitioners' qualifications and ongoing professional development. We have made representations to each successive Secretary of State for Justice and receive assurances about the internal process However the internal process will not achieve the confidence and rigour that is offered by the regulatory arrangements for social work, law, medicine and many others. The introduction of an internal register emphasises the importance of the Probation Institute as the external body working to enhance professional development through events, publications and open discourse for practitioners, academics and people with a commitment to rehabilitation.

We were very pleased to read the HMI Report - Ground breaking report:

> *'Examining the links between probation supervision and positive outcomes – early progress'. This report examines 1532 case assessments across 32 Probation Delivery Units providing evidence confirming that positive progress was significantly more likely when probation delivery was of a high-quality nature. 'The judgement regarding early outcomes was positive in 72 per cent of those cases where (the) inspectors had concluded that the delivery (i) engaged the person on probation, (ii) supported their desistance, and (iii) kept others safe.'*



An interview with Rob Canton Patron of the Probation Institute

Interviewed by Jake Phillips, Editor, PQ

https://doi.org/10.54006/BPQR7753

1. You have been the Patron of PI for around a year now. You were awarded this role in recognition of the contribution you've made to the field of probation studies over a long career but I'd like to start at the beginning: what got you into probation in the first place?

As an undergraduate, I studied Latin and Greek, Ancient History and Philosophy. I enjoyed these studies very much and they have enriched my life in any number of ways. But they pointed towards no particular career path and when I graduated I had nothing more than the vaguest idea that I might like to do something to help people in difficulty. I rang Social Services, but ran out of coins at the payphone before they could find anyone to speak to me! I phoned up the local probation service and was offered an appointment with the Chief Officer the very next day and on the spot he offered me a role working in a voluntary sector hostel for people just coming out of prison. I worked there for just over a year, living in a flat on the premises, and I absolutely loved it. We weren't far away from Grendon. Some of our residents had spent time there and in fact we aspired to being a therapeutic community - even though none of us on the staff had any knowledge or experience of what this really meant. There were also men from Broadmoor and these experiences gave me a career long interest in criminal justice and mental health. We had a lot to do with the local probation staff, of course, and I decided to apply to be a trainee probation officer. I studied for the MA / CQSW at the University of Nottingham - a city I didn't know at all then, but where I have now lived for 45 years.

Jake Phillips
Reader in Criminology
Sheffield Hallam University

2. And how did you then end up working in the university/doing research?

When I qualified, I worked as a probation officer in and around Nottingham for nine years. I'd never been particularly attracted to management roles (perhaps I was scared of them?), but I became a practice teacher and thoroughly enjoyed this work. So when they advertised for the position of Senior Probation Officer in the Home Office Student Unit, I applied and was given that position. After about a year, Nottingham University got in touch with me and asked me if I would like to teach criminology. Their only criminologist had just left; they didn't want to appoint another, but they were keen to offer this subject to their students. I taught this on my own for a year, with students from Law as well as Social Policy, and found it both challenging and rewarding. It was tough to fit in around a full-time job, but with support I managed to make it work.

After that first year, I was joined by staff from the Law School and over several years did joint teaching with them. Some years later, Charlotte Knight at De Montfort, who was to become a good friend and mentor, commissioned me to write a training manual for the Home Office on working with 'Mentally Disordered Offenders' (an expression I now dislike). When the Diploma in Probation Studies was introduced, I went to work in the Midlands Consortium and made connections with a number of universities across the region. After a couple of years, De Montfort, for whom I had already been teaching a module on 'Penal Policy', advertised for staff to deliver their probation programme and I was appointed in 2001. I have always enjoyed writing, although I am not very accomplished in empirical research. Anyway, on the strengths of international work and a few publications, I was appointed Professor in 2007. This may have been too early for me, but I think I grew into the role and helped DMU to achieve its present standing in probation teaching and scholarship.

3. What do you think counts as good quality probation practice? How can probation do good for people on probation and the communities it serves?

In its first incarnation in 2001, the National Probation Service took as its watchwords 'enforcement, rehabilitation and public protection'. Now each of these terms says something about what probation should be doing, but this sometimes obscures crucial questions about how it goes about its work. And by how I don't just mean methods and techniques, for all their undoubted importance. Good quality probation practice should have an unwavering regard for the interests of people under supervision. Sometimes their interests - and certainly their expressed preferences - may have to give way to the rights and interests of other people, but there is no time at which probation staff should fail to show respect and care for them. I would be prepared to defend the idea that probation should be a caring profession.

In the last four years or so, I have become particularly interested in the concept of care and have written about it with my friend, Jane Dominey - who, incidentally, was appointed at De Montfort on the same day that I was. It has become a very unfashionable word in probation terminology, hasn't it? But I think its meaning and significance are misunderstood. Notably, the antithesis between care and control is a conceptual confusion. (For that matter, while it is a legitimate penal aim to prevent people from behaving in certain ways, is it justifiable to try to 'control' them? Control, particularly when used coercively, is rightly deplored.) I'm trying to write something about this at the moment. And although political discourse often sets the interests of people on probation against communities, most of the time their interests are much the same. People on probation (present and past) should be regarded as *members of the community,* even though their acceptance and inclusion often fall short, and respected accordingly. Again, even when their motivation is wobbly and they can't see how to stay out of trouble, most people want to desist and this is naturally what the community wants too.

Once we resist attempts to reduce people to their worst conduct, it should become obvious that people on probation, including those leaving prison, are in many respects much the same as any other cross-section of humanity. They have strengths, skills and experiences (including their experiences of prison and probation) which could be put to use creatively not only to help other people in trouble, but more generally to enrich our communities. Probation can work to remove obstacles to these potential contributions to the benefit of their clients and the communities they serve.

4. What are the main challenges for probation at the moment?

One conspicuous challenge has been the signs of a return of penal policy to the foreground of political dispute. For rather more than a decade, party political conflict has chosen other arenas, but there have been recent rumblings from both parties to claim that their policies will make society safer and deliver justice to wrongdoers. The consequences of this party-politicisation have always been grim for the probation service and all the more unfortunate now that the Probation Service is part of the civil service and consequently, at least in theory, under the immediate direction of government.

For much of my career, I have heard people in probation say that their work is misunderstood and that a prominent challenge is to explain its mission more clearly. It is said that if only the public understood probation's work better, the profession would enjoy more confidence and support. Yet efforts to achieve this have a very long history of disappointment. And I'm afraid I have a gloomier view anyway. For me, perhaps the most important thing about probation is not just what it does in terms of supporting desistance and protecting the public, but what it stands for - its values that should be expressed in and through its practices. These include belief in the possibility of change and that this is best accomplished by social inclusion and giving people fair opportunities to live lives in which offending has no place. And this implies that society has duties towards people attempting to desist. But these values are unfashionable and not easy to articulate even at the best of times. Still, the profession must make its stand for social justice and this will continue to be a prominent challenge.

Among other challenges are the high turnover of staff. A wealth of experience was lost during the turmoil of Transforming Rehabilitation and while no doubt there are new entrants bringing energy and creative new ideas, some are not staying for long. I have heard others express doubts about the motivation of some newcomers for joining in the first place, although one must not become too precious about this: motivations to undertake probation work have always been manifold and mixed.

There are and always have been plenty of other challenges, but one final one to mention here is the importance and difficulty of retaining strong local connections. While the return of the work to the public sector has been rightly celebrated, HMPPS must have the confidence and the trust in its staff to allow diversity in its services to flourish, with a sensitivity to the economic, social and cultural differences in different parts of the country. The principle of responsivity - that individuals are not the same and work must be responsive to that - applies just as much to different areas. This is another aspect of my concern about probation's being part of the civil service.

5. In that context, what advice you give to people thinking about entering the profession?

Working for probation is a wonderful thing. You will be helping some of the most disadvantaged people among us, many of whom have had extraordinarily troubled backgrounds, scarred by all kinds of distress and trauma. The political opposition between 'offenders' and victims can obscure the reality that many people who commit offences have been victims themselves - not just of social injustices, but of crimes committed against them. Supporting desistance is a crucial part of making society safer. This is work in which people may take justifiable pride and some have felt a sense of vocation. At the same time, the work calls for patience and resilience. Clients, as well as the circumstances that so often frustrate their best efforts, can be exasperating. You will often have to be prepared to tolerate uncertainty, yet carry on working purposefully nevertheless. Line managers have their own pressures to deal with and sometimes their instructions may interfere with your idea of the best way to act. Your colleagues will give you strength and comradeship.

6. And what advice would you have for the people who are leading probation?

Politicians should try much harder to avoid making extravagant claims about punishment. The criminal justice system has a useful but essentially minor role in reducing crime. Too many politicians of all varieties give into the temptation to talk up punitivism and try to turn probation into something it isn't, couldn't and shouldn't be.

In some of its recent accounts of recall practices, the Inspectorate has remarked that probation is risk averse. This is hardly surprising! Staff need to be confident that not only their line managers, but also politicians will stand up for them in difficult circumstances. The trouble, of course, is that probation work usually becomes visible to the public only in (what are presented as) its failures - not all of which can be reasonably attributed to probation in any case. Its (innumerable) achievements and the quality of its practice should be more confidently affirmed.

Senior managers must trust their staff. Practitioners should be well educated to undertake their work and then allowed the space to do it. It is not true that increased discretion must lead to discriminatory practice or that it dilutes accountability.

I'd like to offer a final piece of advice here, if I may. There are encouraging signs that probation is at least trying to learn from the experiences of those who have used / are using its services. And there is much more to be done here. Too often probation staff at all levels have been beguiled by their own good intentions into supposing that their work is experienced in the manner intended. Client testimony is showing clearly that it is much harder than this and that some people see probation as intrusive, obstructive and vexatious. It should be none of these things. Probation staff have their duties, as service users recognise, but how these responsibilities are discharged makes a considerable difference.

7. I know you don't have a crystal ball but what do you think the future holds for probation?

Those who know me are aware that my predictive powers are notoriously feeble, so maybe it would be wiser for me to talk about hopes. Hopes include the possibility that the unkindness and hostility that has marked so much political debate over the past decade will begin to cool down a bit. Where there is anger, people who have committed crimes represent a time-honoured, ready focus for resentment and this has implications for the probation service, which will struggle to hold onto its traditional values in such a political climate. 'Talking up' the significance of punishment in response to perceptions of increases in crime also makes it much harder for probation to achieve its aims of rehabilitation and public protection.

There may be times when we might long for some respite from the buffeting of unceasing change. Yet, as the cliché has it, the only constant is change. Perhaps the greatest harm done by the project of Transforming Rehabilitation is that the changes of governance and management and the introspection that all that entailed held probation back from making progress in its practices. Members of the Probation Service include people with potential to innovate and to envisage different and better ways of working and I very much hope that they will be afforded opportunities to do this and not find themselves having to be preoccupied with organisational changes.

Some believe that the practices of probation to which I remain committed are obsolescent if not obsolete. I continue to hold onto the belief that work with people under supervision should be marked by respect for them, patience, kindness and good humour. In fact, I doubt that it is possible to do the job at all in any other way.

And I firmly believe that working in this way is much the most likely way of bringing about the goals of rehabilitation and public protection that the service sets for itself. To help people to become their best you must treat them well. I suspect that all our life experiences teach us this. I hope that probation leaders and politicians will find the courage to affirm this or at least to reject the cruel, destructive and criminogenic punitivism that the politicians and the media so often conjure.

8. And, finally, what role does the Probation Institute have in all of this?

I am honoured to be Patron of the Institute and I share its aspirations. Even so, readers should be aware that I am expressing my own views in answering this question (and all the others) – not speaking on behalf of the Institute. The Institute works hard and has achieved a great deal. It encourages its members to contribute to its responses to government consultations; it sets out its position in a series of papers; it organises events and professional discussions; it has an active research committee; and it publishes the excellent *Probation Quarterly.* For its size and resources, it is, as the expression has it, 'punching above its weight'. At the same time, its influence is modest and perhaps it has yet to discover its full potential.

I know that discussions are taking place in HMPPS about professional registration and if a register of probation professionals is to be established, a further question arises about who is to be its custodian. Central government and the civil service may not be best for this and the Institute may have a contribution to make here.

Probably the biggest challenge for the Institute is to increase its membership. Many new entrants into the profession will want to join the trade union. The advantages of joining Napo will be immediately clear to them, but perhaps the case for membership of the Institute will be less apparent. I was proud to be a member of Napo for more than twenty years and it was only my own change of profession that led me to leave. Napo is a professional association, but it is a trade union as well and the priority of any trade union must be to work in the interests of its members - especially, perhaps, in negotiating their salaries and conditions of service. The Institute on the other hand should have regard to the well-being of the profession of probation - a subtle but significant difference, I think. There will be many occasions when Napo and the Institute will be advocating the same or similar things, but I believe that the Institute can find a distinct space. One way of thinking about this might be to say that the Probation Service, the Probation Institute and Napo have a shared interest in enhancing the policies and practices of probation, even though their roles and contributions are very different. At best, perhaps, they may provide checks and balances to one another to bring about a safer and fairer society, as well as benefits to probation, those who use its services and its own staff.

I have mentioned the shortage of champions of probation and this is a role that the Institute must occupy. The perils here are that being a champion involves the courage to take risks and in a volatile political debate one salient risk is that an unpopular position will be disregarded or scorned. For example, your question could be about what role the Institute can play in supporting the Service to achieve its aims. But these aims are given to it by government and there may be occasions when the Institute should be asking the Service to think differently about its aims and how they may be advanced. There will and should be disagreement and neither the Institute nor the Service should be alarmed about this. I suspect that through these discussions, including respectful disagreements, the Probation Service, the Institute and Napo are all more likely to thrive.

"It takes a village...": the social fabric of recovery and desistance

Max Dennehy, Longford Fellow

https://doi.org/10.54006/BBBT3647

The story so far...

In 2019, having spent the previous fourteen years in the grips of the chaos of drug and alcohol addiction that led to me serving multiple prison sentences, being chronically unemployed – at least in any legitimate sense - and being, in many ways, hopeless; I was in early recovery and living in temporary accommodation having just left rehab. It turns out, however, that I was at the start of two journeys: one into recovery and desistance; and another into education, having been excluded from school at aged 15. I had enrolled onto two Level 2 Adult Learning courses in 'Understanding Mental Health' and 'Understanding Children and Young People's Mental Health'. During this time, a support worker from another service had floated the idea of me starting an 'Access to Higher Education' course. I remember laughing at the absurdity of the concept of me going to university. However, with some encouragement and a point in the right direction, without any expectations of things to come, I enrolled on the course to study social sciences at college. Fast forward to the summer of 2023 and I have just graduated with a first-class BA(hons) degree in Criminology and Sociology from Lancaster University. Furthermore, I was given an award for finishing top of the year for my degree programme – a sentence that doesn't feel real even as I write it! I have a family, I have started to build a career - working within the criminal justice and recovery sector - and I can absolutely envisage a bright future for myself and my family.

Max Dennehy
Longford Fellow

Often, the story that is told of recovery - or recovery and desistance as an interlinked and semi-dependant combination, in the way it features in *my* experience – is one of resilience and tenacity, one of an individual overcoming significant adversity, and, against all the odds, achieving what may once have been deemed impossible. This celebration – the celebration of the individual – *should be* told and sung loudly. The features and narratives mentioned above *absolutely do* feature in the stories of recovering addicts and desisting offenders. However, what is often missing in the story told about individual recovery, and what I hope to convey in this piece, is the social one. Recovery and desistance are social processes.

Two sides of the same coin

Recovery - or *addiction* recovery - is a term used to describe the recovery from substance dependence (White and Kurtz, 2006). However, it is also understood that the separation from substance dependence alone does not necessarily equate to recovery. The Betty Ford Consensus Group (2007: 222) defines recovery from substance dependence as "the voluntarily maintained lifestyle characteristics of sobriety, personal health, and citizenship". Recovery in the community often involves a person actively doing work on themselves whilst simultaneously attempting to forge and foster new pro-social bonds and connections.

Desistance is a term that can be used to describe the process of the cessation of offending (see Maruna, 2001; McNeil, 2006). An estimated one in three people in the adult prison population are suffering from serious addiction issues (Prison Reform Trust, 2023). Often, for those with chronic substance use problems, crime and addiction are inseparable. Much like addiction recovery, desistance can describe a journey and pathway to an intended goal as much as it illustrates a definite arrival point. Although both recovery and desistance are, theoretically, separate concepts that describe separate phenomena, in the context of those who experience problematic substance use and problematic drinking – which often is linked to and contextualises offending behaviour and patterns - I have found both in my *own* lived experience and in the experience of those who I work with, that often, the process of recovery and desistance are two sides of the same coin – they both intersect *and* support each other.

A Social Matrix

Research shows that often, those who have experienced chronic problematic drug use, alongside a prolonged and repeated offending history, have experienced – or are experiencing – a history of multiple and compounding disadvantages (see Bramley, Fitzpatrick, and Sosenko, 2020). Such disadvantages include school exclusion, childhood trauma, poverty, homelessness, criminal justice involvement, domestic abuse and neurodivergence - amongst others. The intersection of such experiences with drug addiction and criminal justice system contact often means this user cohort is significantly marginalised and socially excluded. The notion of creating or building on social capital during the recovery and/or desistance process to sustain recovery and mitigate the chronic experience of social exclusion is not new. Similar to Bourdieu's (1986) notion of social capital, the idea of 'recovery capital' (Granfield and Cloud, 1996) has been developed and is widely accepted as a practical framework across the addiction recovery treatment sector. It is understood that access to networks of pro-social peers and community engagement significantly aids the recovery process (Best, Irving and Albertson, 2017).

Like many others, when I arrived at the point of early recovery and embarked upon the process of desistance, whilst spending years within anti-social and pro-criminal networks and connections, I found myself with a distinct lack of social capital and the pro-social connections needed to promote, stimulate, and sustain my recovery and desistance. However, when I reflect on my time over the last five years, and particularly those early, most crucial, and most formidable years, I observe a social matrix: a tapestry of individuals – friendships, professionals and mentors – and structures, that cut across statutory services, third sector organisations, CIC's, professionals, educators, mutual aid, and, arguably most importantly, organic social networks and communities.

From the early recovery services and professionals who aided my initial steps into rehab, to the volunteer coordinator who went the extra mile to get me my first volunteer role – despite the endless risk assessments - and the relationship that we built, to the college tutors on those early courses that understood the context of my past and stimulated my appetite and belief for learning; from the company that gave me my first paid position and the co-worker who explained how to fill out application forms and practised interview preparation with me, to the number of people who have taken on roles as mentors and friends - an exhaustive list would be too long to write for this piece. The point I aim to convey is that this wealth of interactions, exchange, and relationships - however fleeting they may, or may not be as singular events - are the very fabric and consistency of my recovery and desistance. They have become inseparable from my ability to maintain, and to thrive, into the life and position I now find myself in.

It takes a village.

While both recovery and desistance are seen broadly as positive and welcomed, these processes can often seem - to those outside of the dedicated support structures - as something that happens 'over there'; somewhat distant. Often, the local drug or probation service, mutual aid fellowships, and the somewhat abstract idea of 'rehabilitation centres' monopolise the imaginary of the recovery and desistance landscape. In the last decade, there has been a positive and welcomed move to include third-sector recovery organisations into this fold. However, I assert that this is not far enough. I am proposing to (re)imagine what a society conducive to recovery and desistance looks like - a *'Recovery Ready'* community (see also, Ashford et al. 2020). Much like the televisions that were on sale in the early 2000s that were 'HD Ready' – that is, equipped and ready to receive high-definition broadcasts, should they arrive – the entire spectrum of the social fabric and institutions that make up our communities should aim to be 'recovery ready'. Housing providers, healthcare, sports organisations, mental health services, education providers, the voluntary sector, faith groups, women's services, work coaches, gyms (the list goes on and on) should all be ready to receive, welcome, integrate, and absorb those who are on the recovery and desistance process, should they arrive.

As mentioned previously, often those who populate the duality of both addiction and criminality are amongst the most marginalised and socially excluded members of our society. A proactive approach that promotes the inclusion and wholesale integration of recovering addicts and desisting offenders into the wider community is needed to combat the chronic social exclusion and marginalisation that many have faced over the years. Biernacki (1986: 141) states that, for previously dependent substance users to recover, "addicts must fashion new identities, perspectives and social world involvement wherein the addicted identity is excluded or dramatically depreciated". Similarly, the notion of tertiary desistance (McNeill, 2014) describes the necessity of belonging to a community. It is argued that for a transition to be whole, this requires the "...corroboration of that new identity within a community" – a person's new identity has to be witnessed, authenticated and legitimised by a social group (Best, 2019: 8). It is in this process of building and accumulating social and recovery capital, new sustainable identities can be constructed.

This (re)imagining of the recovery and desistance landscape into one that breaches the confounds of the traditional dedicated support elements, and becomes one that spans the entirety of the social fabric that underpins our communities, will require collaboration, and communication between services, professionals, and social institutions in order to create a genuinely inclusive and reintegrative environment; one in which recovering addicts and desisters have access to social and recovery capital and social networks in order to facilitate and sustain their position (see also, "Recovery cities" Best and Coleman, 2019).

It is also essential that individuals and professionals – members of the community, from beyond what would usually be considered as the 'recovery and desistance' landscape - absolutely recognise their own agency and take an active role in facilitating this process. Whilst the wealth of my positive engagements may have happened within the context of structured organisations, it is the individuals themselves who have made the deepest impressions and given time and attention at a time in which I felt I most needed it. If we truly want to live in a society in which people have an opportunity to enact change and achieve their potential - whatever that may look like - it requires a top to bottom, community-wide approach. After all, it takes a village...

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Co-constructing desistance narratives in probation interactions

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Introduction[1]

Probation aims to promote desistance from offending. However, how probation officers do this in their interactions with clients is unclear. Analysing sessions of a groupwork programme addressing sexual offending, we examined how practitioners promoted and encouraged desistance identities through talk. We identified how practitioners and clients build a story of clients being fundamentally good people, separate to their offending behaviour, and how both skilfully manage the tensions of holding clients accountable for offending while also enabling them to account for their behaviours. Examining the actual interactions in criminal justice interventions opens up the 'black box' of probation practice.

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Desistance narratives

People desist from offending by having a story about who they are that is inconsistent with offending behaviour, projects prosocial future aspirations and clearly accounts for offending behaviour (Gadd & Farrall, 2004; Maruna, 2001; Rocque et al., 2016). These self-stories, or narrative identities, are formed as we weave past experiences, current circumstances and future goals together into a coherent biography (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Interactions with other people, institutions and wider social discourses actively shape, edit and refine these stories. As such, criminal justice interventions can provide fertile ground for clients to 're-story' their lives, and construct a non-offending identity.

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[1] This article and the findings presented are taken from Mullins, E., & Kirkwood, S. (2021). Co-authoring desistance narratives: Analysing interactions in groupwork for addressing sexual offending. Criminology & Criminal Justice, 21(3), 316–333. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895819863101

Central to the self-story of people desisting from offending is a true 'core self', an enduring positive moral identity. To help construct this identity, desisters separate their offending behaviour from their 'core self' by attributing offending to situational rather than dispositional factors (Farmer et al., 2015; Gadd & Farrall, 2004; Maruna, 2004; McAlinden et al., 2016; Rocque et al., 2016). For example, explaining shoplifting as due to financial hardship rather than dishonesty. However, in criminal justice settings, situational accounts for offending, especially sexual offending, may be seen as 'excuses'. This is a dilemma for probation because people are to be held accountable for their behaviour and the harms they have caused whilst research highlights that situational accounts for offending support desistance (Kras & Blasko, 2016; Waldram, 2010; Ware & Mann, 2012). Little is known about what actually happens in probation interactions to manage this dilemma and promote desistance, as most previous research has used retrospective interviews. Here we look at how practitioners and clients of a probation programme addressing sexual offending delicately manage this balance in their interactions, through the words and gestures they use, to help build the client's non-offending self-story or identity.

Methods

In our study (Mullins & Kirkwood, 2021) we analysed sessions of the Scottish national groupwork programme for addressing sexual offending, 'Moving Forward: Making Changes'. This is a court mandated programme, based on the Good Lives Model approach (see Ward & Maruna, 2007), for adult men (18+) convicted of sexual offences. 5 practitioners and 18 clients consented to participate.

Video recordings of 12 groupwork sessions, from 3 separate groups, were selected for analysis. These were viewed and transcribed in fine detail, including pauses, breaths, laughter etc. The participants were accustomed to being video recorded as sessions were routinely recorded for internal quality assurance. We chose the recordings with the best audio and visual quality.

Our method of analysis differs from much previous research on desistance, which has relied heavily on retrospective interviews. We are interested in what is happening specifically within the interactions in criminal justice settings, recognising a research interview is necessarily a different context where people will behave differently, e.g., minimising offending behaviours in a research interview will not have the same repercussions for a client as it would in a probation appointment. To examine the interactions we use conversation analysis and discursive psychology, which consider the micro-level utterance by utterance sequence of talk to see what people are doing, e.g., encouraging, censuring, and how they are doing it (Mullins et al., 2022; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Looking at the talk in this level of detail allows us to see how accounts and identities are presented, invited and negotiated in the interactions.

Findings

1. Practitioners and clients created interactional spaces for situational accounts of offending

Practitioners encouraged situational accounts of offending in the words they chose, as in Extract 1 below. The subtle change of the groupworker's question from 'how you' to 'why you're here' (line 4) gently directs the client to provide an account for their offending behaviour, their being 'here' on a groupwork programme addressing sexual offending. Asking why you are here, rather than, for example, why you offended allows for a situational account, whilst the 'kind of' and 'somehow' soften the directness of the question. The other clients pick up the mantle, showing they hear G2's question as permitting a situational account and ask for this directly – i.e., 'what made you basically offend', 'be in a situation'. This explicit framing is not challenged by the groupworker. The group take this further and separate the behaviour from the client's good 'core self' (lines 11 & 12). Before the client in focus, Brian, has responded, his self-story as a good person who had a lapse in judgement is being constructed by the group.

Extract 1

1	G2:	We've got to know you a bit. It sounds like Evan's kind of drilling down
2		a wee bit here though. What's- I mean what's relevant cause this is not just about
3		saying what was your childhood like it's like it's about working out what's
4		relevant to kind of >how you how you< <why you're here
5		[°somehow°>
6	Dale:	[wh what what made you basically offend
7	Evan:	Because-
8	Dale:	OR be in a situation that [you got done for-
9	Brian:	[eh::::
10	Dale:	you got charged as an offender or something [like that.
11	Evan:	[yeah because you are
12		an intelligent person and you've got a good head on your shoulders.
13	Brian:	Hmm

Clients also offered situational explanations of their offending behaviours for evaluation by the group. These were presented tentatively and with qualifying statements, as Carl does in extract 2 below on lines 1 & 2, highlighting the shared understanding that such explanations in this setting can be seen problematically as 'making excuses'. Clients used passive references to separate their 'core self' from the offending behaviour – for example, referring to offences as 'it' or 'mistakes'. Others' responses to these explanations edited and refined the narrative. As seen here, where the groupworker encourages Carl to continue his explanation through minimal utterances 'hmm', and, although it is not a strong endorsement, the lack of challenge implies his carefully presented account is at least accepted, institutionally reinforcing the story.

Extract 2

1	Carl:	And I and I think the fact which I'm not (.) agreeing and I'm not saying that it's
2		any worse or any less than anything else
3	G4:	uh hm
4	Carl:	but the fact that like I was fourteen fifteen at the time
5	G4:	uh hm [I remember you saying
6	Carl:	[<I don't know if that would be>
7	G4:	((clears throat))
8	Carl:	like eh more like accepting of it or if it would be worse the fact that
9	G4:	hmmm
10	Carl:	she's got a seventeen year old son which (.) she could be thinking well when
11		he was like fourteen would he have made that same mistake how can
12		[he make that mistake=
13	G4:	[hmm
14	Carl:	=or sh she she could look at it people make mistakes I don't know (.) but I've
15		(1)
16	G4:	Right eh certainly what I'm getting out eh a sense of here Carl is that your
17		relationship is very important for [you.
18	Carl:	[yeah
19	G4:	You you have a long longer term view of [this
20	Carl:	[yeah yeah

2. Practitioners subtly modified situational accounts

Situational accounts can be problematic as they seem to reduce accountability, which clashes with one of the goals of the criminal justice system. Groupworkers moderated this in a number of ways, including placing the client as an active agent e.g., through changing the pronouns (from 'it' to 'you).

Extract 3

10	Frank:	°why it all come to that yeah°
11		(3)
12	G5:	So a better understanding of why you came to offend.

Another strategy was to link offending to clients' traits, but ones that could be addressed and changed, e.g., relationship styles.

Extract 4

17	G2:	But that area though of (.) being close feeling close
18	Evan:	yeah
19	G2:	is an area which you can link to your offending >which is linked to
20		relationship
21	Evan:	Yeah [yeah
22	G2:	[styles< and an-
23	Evan:	It's like jumping into one relationship from the shop
24	G2	ah hah

3. Good 'core self' was made explicit

Centrally, clients were explicitly encouraged to accept a narrative of having a good core self, as in extract 1 and below on line 13, without dismissing personal responsibility for their behaviour or ignoring tendencies that could constitute a risk of further offending.

Extract 5

8	G1:	So so your goal in terms of happiness what I'm picking up from that is
9		that (.) eh eh eh something about (.) this ((points to flipchart)) I wonder
10		if it's connecting to this again. You know you want to tell yourself that
11		(.) you're (.) and this (.) ((points to flipchart)) that you're you're not
12		someone who's defined by your offences that Brian said you know that
13		you're someone else (.) you're a good person
14	Fred:	yeah °aye°

Discussion

Examining recordings of probation sessions, and analysing them with methods such as conversation analysis and discursive psychology, illuminate how practitioners go about their work, and help us understand the connections between effective practice and desistance from crime. Here we see the subtle conversational work practitioners and clients do to support desistance and also hold clients responsible for their actions. Using this approach, we have explored different aspects of probation-in-practice, such as how practitioners and clients respond to ambivalence and encourage desistance (Kirkwood, 2016), how shame is dealt with (Mullins & Kirkwood, 2019), how risk is incorporated into client narratives (Mullins & Kirkwood, 2022a), and how warmth and respect are enacted in practice (Mullins & Kirkwood, 2022b). Examining practice in this way helps us develop a deeper understanding of how probation practice can effect change, and can support practitioners to reflect on practice (Kirkwood et al., 2016). Given the main way that probation practitioners do their work is through talking, it seems crucial that we examine what this talk looks like, and its role in helping people move away from offending.

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XR technology and risk assessment: The future of probation training?

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Risk assessment and prediction plays a key role in decision-making across all aspects of professional practice (Beck, 1992), with the criminal justice process standing out as an important example of the complex cognitive requirements associated with such judgements (Hartmann & Wenzelburger, 2021). Current calls for a more standardised approach to risk assessment judgments in the context of probation, alongside a reliance on associated risk technologies presents practitioners with pressure (from both political and media sources) to be accurate risk predictors (Fitzgibbon, 2011; Clift, 2012). However, research and theory from the cognitive psychology domain highlights the inherent issues associated with skill acquisition and expertise in a specific domain. Cognitive processes that develop through experience can result in more efficient decision making, but also carry the risk of bias, especially when information is limited or ambiguous (Klein, 2009). As noted by Nash (2005), public protection is intolerant of error, however errors can be an unavoidable consequence of the use of heuristics. For probation practitioners, the impact of availability, recency and vividness biases (Kahneman & Tversky, 1972), as well as risk aversion (Kemshall, 1998) can be compounded by societal and political pressure relating to certain offending cohorts - sexual offenders, for example (Ansbro 2010; Cohen et al., 2020).

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Structured and effective training at the early stages of an individual's career may go some way to highlighting the existence, and increasing awareness of the potential for inflexible thinking, overconfidence and reduced creativity in problem solving that comes as the result of experience and expertise (Dror, 2011).

Current risk assessment training is underpinned by the Risk of Serious Harm Guidance (HMPPS, 2021), and the principles of RNR (Andrews and Bonta, 2007). As such the theoretical and evidence base for the approach is strong, but the practical training components are often reliant on role play scenarios, an approach that has been criticised for a lack of realism and an artificial feel (Fineman & Eden, 1981). Recent restrictions on face-to-face training have also reduced in-person interactions prior to embarking on real-life risk assessment scenarios, and it is these issues that our research aims to address.

As a research team, we are interested in how we can build on the concept of digital criminology (Powell et al., 2018) to integrate digital technology into everyday practice. We do this by examining the role that Extended Reality (XR) technology can play in augmenting current training in the probation domain. XR technology is an umbrella term for a range of technologies, including virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and mixed reality (MR). We chose a home visit scenario as a pilot for our research, with the aim of comparing a fully immersive (VR) training experience to one presented using 360 videos. Each of these technologies provide the user with an experience that, in our perspective, enhances a role play or written case example, but in different ways, and with different limitations. VR offers a fully immersive, interactable experience, but is costly in relation to time, space and accessibility. 360 immersive video, on the other hand, offers the benefit of realism (photographic images) and versatility (the simulation and can be shared using a QR code and viewed on a handheld device or laptop) but does not allow the user to manipulate objects in the environment. We feel strongly that any addition of technology to existing training must be fit for purpose and based on a foundation of empirical evidence, and as such, the current study provides the first steps towards testing the effectiveness of the two chosen technologies for improving risk assessment training in early career practitioners.

In our small-scale pilot study, we asked 23 early career and trainee probation officers to reflect on risk assessment judgements made after conducting a virtual home visit, using either 360 immersive video, or virtual reality (using a head mounted display, HMD). Participants were first provided with a case history for our fictional person on probation ('Toby'), after which they were asked to conduct a 'home visit'. Participants were assigned to either the 360 condition (filmed in a single room bedsit, and incorporating a range of ambiguous items designed to promote discussion about risk judgements), or the VR condition (a replica of the 360 built in Unity Pro Engine). After conducting the home visit, participants completed a survey regarding their previous training and practical risk assessment experience, perceptions of the purpose of home visits, and their personal risk judgements following completion of the home visit.

Overall, the findings of the research, while based on a small sample, were overwhelmingly positive. Both conditions promoted not only the identification of relevant risk factors, but also discussion regarding the nature of the risk posed by items in the home environment. The ambiguity of some of the items elicited some promising benefits in relation to the challenging of unconscious biases, as well as in promoting professional curiosity. While no significant difference was found in the number of risk (and protective) factors identified by participants in the VR compared to the 360 condition, more discourse arose from the 360 condition, an encouraging, but perhaps unexpected, finding in support of the use of this more accessible technology.

Despite the limitations of this small-scale study, we are excited to continue to develop not only additional XR simulations, but also to enhance the evidence base for this type of technology-enhanced learning in probation education. It is imperative that any enhancements are fit for purpose, and that they reflect the training needs of both the probation context and the learners. Knowledge gaps and training requirements must be addressed in a reflexive manner, and the careful development of simulated environments that can be adapted and adjusted in accordance with learner and tutor reflections may provide an invaluable addition to existing training methods. In addition to the opportunity to uncover unconscious bias and provide ongoing formative and summative feedback, the use of simulations enables repeated practice in hard-to-access and potentially risky scenarios. It also allows decisions to be considered in a less pressured environment. The capacity to provide remote, practical learning shows great potential, with environmental benefits and increased accessibility for learners with disabilities or personal responsibilities that make travelling to a distant training site difficult. It allows for more opportunities for observation of practice, providing a level of resilience that is all too appreciated in the wake of a global pandemic. Alongside providing invaluable opportunities for learning in early career probation officers, the current exploratory research shows significant potential for increasing learner satisfaction, confidence and accuracy in their risk assessment and home visit practices with benefits for probation learners, those being supervised, and the community as a whole.

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The experience of black, Asian and minority ethnic residents in APs: An exploratory study

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This article considers findings from an original research study which explored the experience of 15 black, Asian and minority ethnic residents in Approved Premises (APs) in one Probation Service region. Despite the important role APs have in risk management of high-risk offenders in the community (Burnett and Eaton 2004, Wincup 2007), there has been limited academic focus in this area (Thurston, 2002, HMIP 2017). In relation to residents' needs, exploration of the experience of black, Asian and minority ethnic service users in an AP setting is almost invisible with attention focussing on low referrals to APs (Todd 1996, Kazi et al. 2001). This article is about whether Black, Minority Ethnic (BME) AP residents feel that their culture was recognised and whether they were treated equally and fairly.

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Methodology

In this qualitative study semi- structured interviews were conducted to capture the experiences of interviewees. All interviews were recorded, and I subsequently transcribed them and identified codes to organise the data; the interpretation of the codes leading to three themes. The probation region has 13 Approved Premises, including one female AP that was not included as the data would be too limited to generate themes. The 15 men resided in six of the APs, the period of residence at the time of interview ranging from two weeks to almost six months. The length of their last custodial sentence ranged from 12 months to 9 years. To maintain anonymity, all names in this article are pseudonyms.

Findings

Three themes were generated through the data analysis of the interviews. The first theme focused on how important it was to interviewees that their culture was recognised and their views on whether they were treated equally and fairly by staff. The second theme explored the men's experiences that reflect a lack of control and certainty in their lives and pains of residing in an AP. The third theme addressed what the men reported to be important to their reintegration into the community and how supported, or not, they are in achieving this. This article will focus on the first theme, though the findings from the second and third themes are equally as important for Approved Premises and Probation Service practitioners to reflect on.

There was a mixed response to whether it is important that individuals' differences were recognised. A small number quickly answered that it was not important to them; that being treated respectfully was their primary concern. Others simply did not ascribe importance to race and ethnicity.

> *'As long as they talk to me with respect and treat me with respect, colour don't matter to me'. (Andrew)*

For others recognition was important because it goes to the core of who each person is and their background. Though the men all answered positively that they felt ethnicity was recognised by the APs, when asked for specific examples some struggled. There were two explicit examples discussed of how cultural difference was acknowledged: religion and food.

Ethnicity is a term not everyone subscribes to, as some people may feel more affiliation to religious groups (Jones and Gnanapala 2000). Four men spoke of their Muslim faith and the importance of this being recognised. Academic writing regarding the link between religion and desistance initially focused on Christianity (Maruna, Wilson and Curran 2006, Giordano et al. 2008, Hallett and McCoy 2015) but in more recent years there have been studies into the transformative impact of Islam. Such research has identified 'an interlink between desistance, religion and identity' (Robinson-Edwards and Pinkney 2018: 47) whilst in DiPietro and Dickinson's (2021: 667) life history research with four Bosnian refugees Islam was found to have 'played a pivotal role' in restructuring their understanding of self, necessary to desist from crime. In my study, for those who practiced the Muslim faith proximity of the Approved Premises to a mosque was important.

Although the Masjid was not as close as he would have liked, one participant was appreciative of the AP's respect for his religion by the provision of two fridges, one for halal products. He was also appreciative that when he explained to staff that he needed space to lay out his prayer mat they were understanding and stated he could use the lounge to pray, and a note would be put on the door.

> *It's very important... prayer and reciting the Koran, as a Muslim it makes me a better person. Understanding of how a true Muslim should be living their life. (Ismail)*

Food is a way that cultural identity can be recognised, and individuals feel included (Kazi et al. 2001, HMIP 2022). Compliments on the diversity of food provided was raised in most interviews. A connection was made between a diverse menu and being understood.

> *There's a good chef, she caters for our needs sometimes. She understands. (Michael)*

Religion and food identified as indicators of recognition of cultural difference, the data also highlighted the importance of the interviewee's perceptions about interactions with staff.

Todd (1996) and Kazi et al's. (2001) studies that explored low referral rates for BME service users, suggested increased employment of staff from BME backgrounds. All the men in my study acknowledged that the AP staff included staff from BME backgrounds. However, there was no common view that confirmed this mattered to the participants. Two of the participants of Black British heritage said that they were more comfortable talking with staff that they felt understood them more:

> *I think I can talk to any of them but there's only specific ones that I actually talk to. And it will be the black staff. In my eyes they kind of understand what I am saying to them more than if I was to talk to a white one. (Michael)*

Using data collated from observation and interviews with staff and residents in three APs in England, Irwin-Rogers identified two 'sources' of legitimacy: procedure-based and outcome-based, proposing that by treating service users with dignity and respect supervisors could gain 'a high-degree of procedure-based legitimacy' (2017: 59). Of importance to all the participants in my study was to be treated respectfully.

All the men stated that they did feel they were treated with respect, expressing few irritations. One irritation was room checks. Two men in different APs gave accounts that were received in one example as being treated respectfully and in another not.

> *I always leave my key on the outside of the door so that they can just come in, but they never do, they always knock. (Carl)*

In another AP a participant had a different experience and indicated that he felt he was shown more respect from a black member of staff:

> *They knock the door and just come in. What's the point of knocking the door if you're just going to walk in anyway?' There's only a few staff that do that. The black woman that's on today, she knocks the door, makes sure you're dressed. She treats you with a bit more respect. The others just knock your door and walk straight through. (Michael).*

The account above was one of just two describing different treatment by BME and white staff. In the other account of disparity in treatment, a participant shared that residents are not allowed to go out after 11pm and when he had asked to go into the garden to have a cigarette, he was told no, but on occasions he had seen a white resident go out for a cigarette. He believed that this was because 'a white member of staff was on'. Such accounts of inconsistent application of rules may impact on the perceived legitimacy of staff enforcing rules.

Apart from the above accounts, most interviewees said that they felt that staff were respectful, polite, and fair. All participants said that staff treated everyone the same. Being treated the same was largely stated as being positive, however one participant presented an alternative perspective.

> *I think the model that they use it's a one size fits all. Everyone that comes through the door they use that same template. (Christopher)*

The same individual went on to suggest that there was more that could be done to respond to diversity; 'They should treat each individual that comes through the door as someone different, someone special then'.

Conclusion

The 15 interviewees were largely positive about their experience of the six APs in the region. Beyond the region the findings have wider implications for the understanding of effective practice in APs. The interviewees discussed the importance of recognition of religion, providing a diverse menu and treating residents respectfully, fairly and consistently. This research contributes to filling the gap in the lack of evidence around good practice in AP settings. Residents in APs have a choice as to whether they comply, and staff behaviour influences their perception of authority figures. Tyler's (2006) research on procedural fairness suggested that every encounter between the police and citizens can make a difference to how the legitimacy of their authority is perceived. Such 'teachable moments' could also be applied in an AP setting. Several staff were named in interviews in a positive light, that could potentially have a lasting impact on perceptions of authority figures and be role models. If Approved Premises are to have a meaningful role in rehabilitation and resettlement as well as public protection, it is important that there is effective practice with residents from different backgrounds.

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Memoirs of probation

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When I'm asked about the key turning point that led to me break the cycle of re-offending, I usually attribute it to my transition through higher education which was a transformative experience during my time in prison and after release. However, despite education being a major conduit to self-change, I cannot emphasise enough the huge impact the probation service had on my successful road to desistance.

My earliest memories of probation was in 1985: I had just been released on parole after serving 10 months of a 30-month youth custody sentence. I can remember my 21-year-old probation officer being as naive as I was in many ways but as we were almost the same age, it really hit home what very different paths our lives had taken. At that point I was not what you might call a 'recidivist'. In other words, I wasn't your stereotypical, habitual criminal, but I had a lot of issues.

These issues were later diagnosed as having their roots in a borderline personality disorder and had it not been for my probation officer's determination to find out why I was unable to manage my life I'd have never had this diagnosis.

I began sliding into criminality at 19 which is old. I was never a fighter or from a 'tough' background. In fact it had been sheltered in many ways having been raised on Royal Air Force camps throughout most of my childhood until I was 13. In hindsight, these communities feel like they were too closely knit and because of this I was unable to escape the relentless bullying I was subjected to by other kids on the camp.

It was bullies that led to my behaviour changes and later in life the environment played a huge role. My father was born and bred in Middlesbrough and after leaving the RAF he took us to his hometown where I went to school and

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continued to live for most of my young life. The bullying never stopped, but I began to change!

Middlesbrough was a tough area and moving there was a massive culture shock to myself and my older sister, Carol. This was another very close-knit community which began to wane around the 1990s with the local councils' ideas of gentrification. These close-knit communities were dispersed, replaced by anti-social behaviour and relentless crime including burglaries and criminal damage.

This impacted greatly on my own sense of self, at a time when I didn't really know who I was or where I was going. At that time, I had no qualifications and a criminal record, so options were limited. I did eventually study an access course at the local college in Redcar, but after failing my exam, began to go haywire! I had been all set for university and had even been made a conditional offer at Durham University (Stockton campus). It was 1993, and as I began to slide into a stupor of alcohol binge drinking and confusion about my future, prison seemed inevitable.

It happened in 1995 after a vicious revenge attack on someone in a local pub. Even today, I can't quite fathom who that person was. I was sentenced to five years imprisonment at Teesside Crown Court and at the halfway mark of two years and six months, I was paroled to reside in a hostel in North Shields. During my time in prison, I'd taken up an Open University foundation course similar to the access course I'd attempted at Redcar college, but this time I passed!

I was paroled for the remainder of my sentence; a total of 10 months. I believe this was heavily influenced by the fact I'd been made an unconditional offer to study criminology and sociology at Northumbria university in Newcastle Upon Tyne and ultimately is why I ended up in North Shields.

This was a massive boost for my sense of self and it was one of the most exciting times of my life, but old demons began to resurface. The alcohol soon crept back in and I struggled to readjust to life outside of prison. It wasn't as though I'd spent decades behind bars but rather the chaotic behaviours of my personality that were having a negative impact on my life.

As mentioned earlier, this is where the probation service really stepped up. It was clear to my probation officer that I was haywire. During my time on parole, I had committed several offences including criminal damage and assault. I was sentenced at the Magistrates' court and given fines and an additional probation order.

I was now on parole, probation and had a fine, not to mention additional criminal convictions. An absolute certain recall I thought! I even asked the Police on two occasions to recall me back to prison but they told me to stop wasting police time because – for some reason - the 'system' said I wasn't on parole!

It was very clear how mixed up I was at that time, yet the probation service continued to be optimistic. I somehow managed to keep studying at university while mixing with criminal associates I had met while in prison: I was leading a double life!

In 1985 I was recalled because I had said to my probation officer that I wanted to hurt someone. Now, in 1998, it seemed to me that no matter what I did, they would not recall me. One day I attended my weekly probation visit covered in cuts and bruises after I'd got into a large-scale brawl with the family of someone I was seeing at the time and also several police officers one of who I assaulted. Still no recall – despite me asking!

I can distinctly remember the probation head at the time saying to me, 'You can turn this around you know Dave'! I replied that there was no chance of that happening!

He was right though! Their persistent optimism and belief in me paid off. I did turn things around and 25 years later I am a criminology lecturer with a PhD and a published author and have recounted my life experiences in my forthcoming book 'Living with Desistance: Breaking the Cycle'.

I now know that my probation officer and the head probation supervisor at North Shields had seen something in me that I clearly couldn't and I can't ever thank them enough!

I'm also a marathon runner and a member of England Athletics. Sport and exercise have been an invaluable part of my life, desistance journey as well as my personal wellbeing. It's well known that exercise is excellent for mental health which I learned many years ago, particularly in relation to running so it's no surprise that running has particularly boomed since the Covid lockdown period. There have been several research studies conducted on the benefits of exercise for prisoners and ex-prisoners because of the mental and physical benefits but also because being part of a team or social group gives them a sense of belonging and identity which are both essential ingredients in the desistance journey.

HMP Belmarsh - Real voices from Category A young adults

Nina McNamara, Bird Podcast

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Bird Podcast has portrayed the UK's challenging criminal justice system for five years. In our latest episode, we spoke to young adults to discover what it really means to do time in HMP Belmarsh.

They shared their experience and suggested improvements to prison conditions and ways to reduce crime in society. We'd like to share some insights from the podcast so readers can hear directly from these young people's experiences. When we refer to someone as a young adult, this means somebody aged 18-25.

Cat A restrictions as a young adult

Most of the young adults we spoke to at Belmarsh are 'Category A' prisoners. This label has restrictions and connotations which can negatively affect a young adult. Being a Cat A prisoner may affect their outcomes and hopes of rehabilitation.

The men we spoke to cited delays in visits, being left out of prison-wide social events and a lack of opportunities to progress, leaving them feeling frustrated and isolated.

> *"There's actually been times I've had to wait a long time until I saw my mum. Obviously, Cat A comes with disadvantages but eight months, seven months... it's just a bit ridiculous."*
> ***Teon, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

In a thematic inspection of Young Adults in custody in 2020, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) found that, generally, outcomes are poor for young adults compared with older prisoners (those over 25). Cat A prisoners are disproportionately subject to the lowest IEP level - IEP refers to the privileges given to prisoners based on good behaviour, e.g. they are placed on Basic, Standard or Enhanced status.

> *"It [being Cat A] messes with you a lot because it's like, everyone's going to do something, and everyone's gone and I'm saying let me go as well, and they say no, you're 'A Cat.' When everyone's coming back to the wing talking about having fun, laughing... you'll just be sitting yourself thinking... Why am I being singled out?"*
> ***Taylor, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

Young adults are disproportionately involved in violence, suggesting that having more money to spend on prison shop items each week, additional visits or television are insufficient in preventing younger prisoners from using violence. Without specific interventions, research finds that young adults remained on the lowest level of the incentives scheme, with no improvement in their behaviour.

> *"As time went on, they segregated me from the rest of the general population, I asked what was going on and he told me, 'You're Cat A now,' so that's when I got into my first real interaction with them... it just all got out of hand...they put me in a banana suit, which is the green and yellow one, double handcuffed me, all that type of stuff made me feel like I was the biggest criminal in the world."*
> ***Taylor, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

Challenges with progression between categories

Each young man we spoke to was willing to self-improve, progress and rehabilitate. Some felt held back by what was available in Belmarsh for young adults and found the Cat A review process frustrating. Often a lack of or breakdown in communication exacerbated the situation:

> *"I've only had one [Cat A review], and they didn't really give me an explanation. I just got a piece of paper that I didn't really understand. My OMU [Offender Management Unit] didn't even come and see me about it."*
> ***CJ, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

Offending behaviour courses are a crucial part of someone progressing to the next category; for young adults in Belmarsh, the courses they need to get to the next stage should be made available.

> *"We're kind of in a Catch-22 Because from 18 to 21, we're here and we're trying to come up from A Cat…every single young Cat A are all stuck in Belmarsh, and we can't do the courses to come off cat A"*
> ***Teon, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

Young adults we spoke to reported feeling 'stuck' since they were too young to go into a high-security environment but too high risk to be in a regular YOI.

> *"… a lot of those courses they take between nine months to a year, so I don't think Belmarsh has the mindset to be keeping prisoners for that long. When I come in, I was like 18, and I can't really go to another jail because I can't go to the high security as I'm not 21 yet… I can't be in a normal YOI because our risk is too high. So you just get stuck here"*
> ***Taylor, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

We heard some positive things regarding learning and progression in Belmarsh. The young adults said that Listeners training and acting classes were the courses they'd benefitted from the most.

> *"The Listeners course was about serious life events, people talk about having all of these problems…that's probably one of my favourite courses I've done that shows you a different side to life 'cos my problems might be problems, but other people's; I've just come prison, I'm gonna lose my house, kids, wife, I'm like woah this is bigger than me."*
> ***Teon, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

> *"It was an acting course that I've done…I played the grandad and all of our families came out… everyone enjoyed it, all the prison staff on the wing and stuff was coming up to us on the wings sayin' you lots done very well"*
> ***CJ, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

Simple things prisons and society can do to make things better

The group had many ideas for improvement based on genuine lived experience. Although Belmarsh is a notoriously violent jail, we also heard many positive things thanks to prison staff willing to go the extra mile. These ideas could benefit prisons nationwide.

We discussed the evolution of young adult (YA) groups over time. Once staff began listening to participants and focusing the groups on current challenges, there was much more engagement and improvement for longer-term prisoners.

> *"At the beginning, we used to speak about what we were going to do on the outside my personal opinion was that didn't make sense because there'll be two people sitting in a YA group, one of them will be on a six month sentence and another is down for twenty-seven years… an officer really took in all our words and things started to change. Now I've got two jobs, I'm a listener and the YA group rep. I feel like that's improved quite a bit."*
> ***Teon, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

Empathy and accountability are critical to building relationships. When staff and prisoners understand each other, it promotes shared responsibility. When Belmarsh decided to host a prison-wide football tournament, prisoners knew the risks staff took and understood that they needed to resolve conflicts for things like this to go ahead. Empathy meant an understanding that causing an altercation during the day would spoil the benefit for everyone.

> *"I just thought about a gov' that helps a lot of us and who kind of put a neck on the line to make the football tournament happen. I said, if this goes wrong, I won't even be able to look at her, I'll avoid her for weeks. That was a great day, we took a big group picture that a lot of us still have on our wall, it's a day that a lot of us appreciated"*
> ***Teon, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

Advice for people serving time

Attitudes and stigma towards Category A prisoners prevent positive change from happening. We found that a human-centred approach creates better outcomes. All of the Young Adults we spoke to have had their own nuanced experiences with prison; different rules, regimes and experiences. Here's five pieces of advice for those who might be finding themselves in a similar situation and are looking for guidance.

1. Read the welcome pack when you arrive
2. Don't stress and keep a calm mind
3. Keep your head down and don't get involved in things you know you shouldn't be getting involved in
4. Stay in contact with family and friends
5. Focus on you and your progression

> *"Don't stress, keep a calm mind and just find any way to get in contact with family… when I first spoke to my mum, everything I just calmed down, my mum calmed me down."*
> ***CJ, Cat A Young Adult in HMP Belmarsh***

Our visit to Belmarsh challenged the stereotypes of the prison. Contrary to stories of violence and turmoil – our guests reported feeling settled here. There are still enormous challenges faced by prisons across the UK, and we hope this episode has highlighted some simple ways the men inside can be treated more humanely, ultimately leading to a kinder society.

Listen to the latest episode: birdpodcast.co.uk

‘Beyond the Gate’: A resource for release planning

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Background

Individuals released from prison encounter a number of challenges upon release. These challenges revolve around structural barriers (Harris, 2011), such as employment, stable housing, pro-social contacts and health (Gålander, 2019; Maruna and Mann, 2019), in addition to issues regarding social capital (Moore and Recker, 2013) and personal agency (Doekhie, Dirkzwager and Nieuwbeerta, 2017; Lloyd and Serin, 2012). People previously engaged in criminalized lifestyles rarely have any of these things, meaning a lot needs to be done as people embark on their desistance journey (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011; Harris, 2011). This magazine provides an important service to individuals therefore, as it addresses the issues of desistance and resettlement presented above and provides important contacts which may assist individuals on their desistance journey.

Introduction

This evaluation reports from a mixed methods approach comprising of both questionnaires and interviews with individuals in prison, family members/significant others of individuals in prison, staff members and the Beyond the Gate team. The aim of this project was to gather views on the Beyond the Gate magazine which aspires to raise awareness of organisations/services that link into resettlement, whilst also publishing real resettlement experiences/stories to inspire individuals within prison. The magazine was piloted at HMP Liverpool from 2020-early 2022. This prison was chosen as a pilot due to the ongoing support provided to the Team during the process of creating the magazine. The aspiration is that the magazine will be rolled out nationally to all prisons within England and Wales. The research team became involved in the evaluation process mid-2020 until the end of 2022.

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The evaluation's purpose is to help the magazine creators develop the magazine in accordance with the views of the readers (individuals in prison), to enable the magazine to reach the audience better, encompassing more of what the individuals within prison want and need within any future editions. This will allow potential future editions to be tailored to individuals in prison, therefore making it more accessible to the wider prison estate.

About the Magazine: 'Beyond the Gate'

The idea for the magazine was generated by the editor whilst they themselves were serving a prison sentence. The voices of those with lived experience are incredibly important within Criminal Justice and are rightly becoming more prominent within Criminal Justice policy. The approach taken by the magazine could therefore be seen as contributing to this increase in voices of those with lived experience. The Beyond the Gate magazine was intended to replace the various information sheets provided in the prison by compiling this information into a magazine format, to replicate the experience of reading a magazine, which is a very popular resource within prison. Having prior experience in prison, the editor felt it was important to have this magazine in a physical format rather than virtual format, due to people in prison not having enough time on the kiosk to appreciate this resource fully. This was also reported during the research by participants, who expressed a real interest in written material.

The magazine is presented on glossy pages, which include pages of advertisements and support charities which may be beneficial to individuals both whilst they are in prison and when they leave prison. The magazine is extremely colourful and includes a wide variety of images to ensure it is inclusive to all individuals in prison, especially those who may have reading difficulties. The content of the magazine includes prison specific and generic service information, personal stories of individuals who have been released from prison and charitable/support contacts which may be of use to individuals. The magazine is aimed at all individuals within prison and is distributed within the first-night pack when an individual enters prison. An obstacle in the magazine's journey has been the issue of funding. The publisher described COVID as playing a big role in the challenge of funding as when COVID hit, all service providers and marketing spends were instantly pulled. Fortunately, the governor at HMP Liverpool helped to secure the money to pilot the first edition. The Beyond the Gate team produced the magazine free of charge to the prison and the sponsors.

Findings

General Magazine Awareness

Individuals within prison all agreed that the magazine was a good idea, with terms such as "*practical*" being used to describe the magazine, along with the idea that the magazine was "*useful to keep going back to*" (Individual within prison). Prison staff also agreed with this. All interviewees mentioned how they thought the magazine was a particularly good idea for individuals entering prison for the first time, stating it is "*perfect for someone who has no idea of what to expect from prison life*" (Individual in prison). The majority of individuals in prison were however not aware of the magazine or the material presented within it. The awareness of the magazine was more prevalent with prison staff, with the majority having seen the magazine before.

The purpose of the magazine was understood as being to "*provide information*" (Individual in prison) for the majority of interviewees, with the magazine being referred to as an "*essential guide*" (Individual in prison). The magazine was viewed as providing information which individuals believed was essential to know and prevented individuals feeling "*confused and not in the know*" (Individual in prison). Individuals in prison also stated how they believed the purpose of the magazine was to: "p*rovide support for inmates*" whilst staff members listed differing purposes such as "*to reassure inmates*", "*to show people they are not alone*" and "*to inform and inspire*".

Design

Generally, the interviewees response to Design was overwhelmingly positive. Interviewees spoke positively regarding the use of colour, using words such as "*eye-catching*", "*positive*" and "*inviting*" to describe this. This use of colour was alluded to in relation to the magazine not feeling like a typical prison publication. Colour was revealed to be something not often used within the prison but was advocated for.

> *Not typical of your usual prison service publication, which would normally be something that's photocopied a million times and looks a bit tatty (Prison Worker)*

The magazine was also praised in relation to its size. A prison worker commented how it "*should not be any smaller…any smaller it would be thrown in the bin*". Individuals within prison also appreciated the size of the magazine, "*it is an ideal size…can't get lost or mixed up in paper*". A criticism of the design was the writing style, with individuals with literacy issues potentially finding the large sections of text and wording of the information difficult to read. The writing style should be revised with 'plain English' being utilised more. Additionally, interviewees commented on the amount of writing, suggesting it was too much for the individuals within prison. Therefore, a suggestion from interviewees was to use less text on each page and to adopt chunking pieces of information to break the pages up.

Content

The magazine content was described as creating optimism in people regarding their futures and providing "*a bit of hope*" (Individual in prison). This is in reference to the personal stories included in the magazine, which are described as "*inspiring people*" (Individual in prison) and showing how being in prison "*is not the end of the world*" (Prison Worker). The content was praised for informing readers of what they need to know about prison in a clear and informative way. This information is specific to HMP Liverpool which was appreciated by interviewees, as it allowed individuals to understand specific rules/ regulations. This practical information was the individuals' favourite content and was only described in positive tones. Although being a success, personal stories were also criticised: "*this is fake, I've heard this story enough times*" (Individual in prison). This lack of realism was mentioned by a number of individuals who suggested a need for a wider variety of unpredictable stories. One suggestion was for stories to focus on the realities and challenges of drugs as a lot of people are now "*desensitised to this*".

The content of the magazine was further criticised for the number of adverts used. One individual in prison described this as being similar to "*the back pages of the echo*", with advertisements dominating the magazine.

Lessons learnt from the evaluation

The importance of the impact the magazine could have on individuals in prisons' support network cannot be disputed, with individuals and staff alike mentioning how the magazine would be useful for loved ones as it would help to answer questions and reassure them. One staff member suggested placing the magazine in the family visit centre whilst another suggesting using it in the family forums ran within the prison. Individuals within prison commented mainly on how the magazine helped to alleviate anxiety regarding the unknown of prison life. It was clear that this magazine would be useful for those serving their first prison sentence and could help to answer questions they may have, which they may have been too intimidated to ask otherwise. Having the information presented clearly is described as extremely helpful and a way to remove unnecessary added stressors.

Concluding comments

It was clear from the evaluation that there was a real appetite for the Beyond the Gate magazine to be embedded into prison life. The potential for the magazine was highlighted by both individuals and staff who could name multiple purposes for the magazine both within prison and outside of prison. Recommendations were provided to the team based on the findings of the evaluation. These included: a need for a continued research project on the initiative, a more in-depth analysis on the design of the magazine, more diverse, authentic and local stories to be included and for the accessibility of the magazine to be considered. If recommendations are acted upon, the magazine has the capacity to be uniquely impactful for individuals within prison and their desistance journey, whilst simultaneously providing a unique learning resource to staff. There were plans to roll out the magazine nationally, however this plan was stalled due to financial contributions as a result of COVID. It is hoped this issue will be rectified shortly to enable the magazine roll-out to be permitted.

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