

The United Together Project

Final Evaluation
Report

June 2021



Executive Summary

The United Together pilot project began in October 2019 as a joint initiative between Active Lancashire, the Cumbria and Lancashire Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC), and seven Community Football Trusts (Accrington Stanley Community Trust, Blackpool FC Community Trust, Blackburn Rovers Community Trust, Burnley FC in the Community, Fleetwood Town Community Trust, Morecambe FC Community Sports, and Preston North End Community and Education Trust).

Its aim is to support ex-offenders in probation to reach their full potential by providing a pathway of personal and professional development. Participants referred to the project are matched with an individual mentor with 'lived experience' with whom they have regular meetings. Peer mentors work closely with probation officers and their clients to agree suitable action plans which include a wide range of opportunities to allow them to reach their full potential.

The United Together project is designed to contribute to a wide range of outcomes. One-to-one mentoring and individual personal development plans enable participants to identify their immediate needs. Through sport and physical activity

sessions, ex-offenders build their confidence and improve their team working and communication skills. Improvements in physical and mental wellbeing are anticipated as participants engage with the project in an informal, non-judgmental and supportive setting.

The evaluation of the project was conducted internally by Active Lancashire. The primary aim was to explore the changes the project had on participants' lives and how it shaped their behaviours, experiences and motivations. It draws upon a mix of qualitative and quantitative data gathered between 2019 and 2021.

The feedback from participants and probation officers was overwhelmingly positive. For probation officers the key success of the project was the different, informal opportunities available for their clients; whilst for participants the essence of the project was definitely the peer support they received through the United Together mentors.

In the 18 months of the project, from **250** referrals, there were **204** individuals who expressed an interest and registered with the project. The majority of the individuals referred to the project were male (**88%**) with only **12%** being female. The average age at referral was **35** years,

with the youngest participant being **18** years old and the oldest **62**. Only **5%** were from a Black, Asian or other Ethnic Minority background.

On average participants remained with the project for 15 weeks. This varied widely across participants, with some finding that their needs were met within a shorter period, whilst others continue to receive support today.

Understanding the needs of the group was important for providing better tailored support. From a sample of **133** participants, we found that the majority of participants wanted support to improve their mental health and wellbeing (**71%**). One in two needed employability support with a further **30%** in need of training or education and **20%** would like to develop through volunteering. A good proportion of participants (**45%**) wanted support in reducing their alcohol/drug intake and **50%** wanted to improve their physical health. **53%** also needed some sort of housing support. Improving family relationships was identified as important by **24%** of participants, with **29%** saying that they felt socially isolated.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought life to a stand-still for many. Interviews with participants during the lockdown have

highlighted the negative impact the lockdown had on their lives but also how the project threw them a lifeline, just by keeping in touch with them, providing them with volunteer opportunities or keeping engaged with activities.

A random sample check on participants showed that the re offending rate amongst those engaged with the United Together project was **26%**. However looking at the cohort of those referred to the project, but who did not engage, **56%** of them re offended more than double those who participated in the project. In 2018/2019 the proven reoffending rate in Blackpool, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Hyndburn, Lancaster, Fylde and Preston ranged between **29%** and **35%**, again indicating that the project has had a positive impact.

Changes in mental wellbeing were measured using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). Data shows that participation in the project significantly increased participants' mental wellbeing and every single person made a meaningful positive change. K's case study shows how the project supported him with his mental health issues and reduced his anxiety. Physical activity also increased with participants spending 1.7 days doing sport and physical activity.

After a few weeks, their participation increased to 3.4 days. Additionally, each Football Community Trust established a Community Hub offering participants a regular routine and access to various social networks promoting social interaction. L's story showcases how football was utilised as a hook for engagement, giving her the opportunity to be involved in various activities and volunteering.

During the project, **36** participants (**18%**) were able to obtain sustainable employment. Furthermore, **39%** of participants enrolled in education or participated in training based on their individual needs. Through accessing education and a wide range of training, participants were able to improve their skills, confidence and employment prospects. Finally, during the duration of the project, **39%** received housing support that enabled them access to secure, safe and suitable accommodation. Uptake of volunteering roles was low with only 1% of participants undertaking formal volunteering. Seven case studies related to employment, training, housing and volunteering demonstrate the impact of the project on participants' lives.

The evidence gathered so far illustrates that there is a real need for this project.

This is reflected in the high volume of referrals as well as in participants and Probation Officers' positive views and experiences.

Through one-to-one mentoring, participants were able to receive support that was tailored to their individual needs. This allowed participants to flourish and see significant improvements in their physical and mental wellbeing.

One of the strengths of the project was peer mentors' 'lived experience' that allowed them to form trusted relationships with each participant. Peer mentors acted as role models who provided constant support and encouragement.

Recommendations

- Strengthening the partnership could lead to a better outcomes, especially for those with substance misuse issues and complex needs
- Strengthening the partnership to meet more diverse needs
- Recognising that not all individuals referred to the project would benefit from it as they may not been ready to engage or may need more time
- Recognition of the value of the constant presence of peer mentors and the importance of the support and encouragement they provide.

Background

The Partnership

United Together began in 2019 as a joint initiative between Active Lancashire, the Cumbria and Lancashire Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC), and seven Community Football Trusts (Accrington Stanley Community Trust, Blackpool FC Community Trust, Blackburn Rovers Community Trust, Burnley FC in the Community, Fleetwood Town Community Trust, Morecambe FC Community Sports, and Preston North End Community and Education Trust) (Figure 1).

Its aim is to support ex-offenders in probation reach their full potential by providing a pathway of personal and professional development. Peer mentors utilise local resources to support

Participants to address specific needs such as housing or substance misuse issues, build their confidence, and improve their skills and employability prospects. The ultimate aim is help them engage in their local communities and prevent re-offending.

The project is county-wide, targeting eight areas that have particularly high re-offending rates. Specifically, the project covers Accrington, Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool, Burnley, Fleetwood, Lancaster, Morecambe and Preston.

Figure 1: The partnership



About the project

The United Together project is for ex-offenders who are under probation supervision. To shape the project, Active Lancashire carried out an initial consultation with key stakeholders such as prisoners, prison guards and all the partners in the Re-Offending Unit.

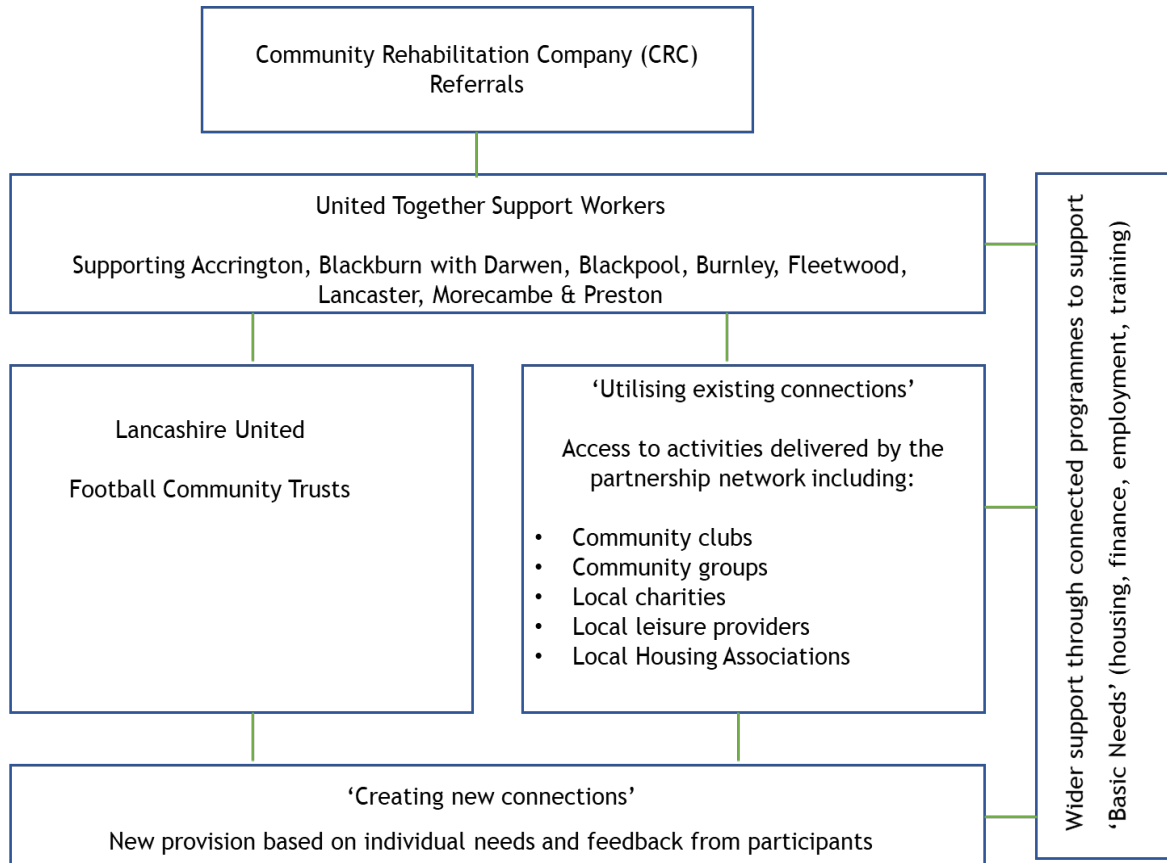
Participants referred to the project are matched with an individual mentor with 'lived experience' with whom they have regular meetings. During these meetings, they discuss their needs and referrals are made to any relevant services. In particular, participants are offered a wide range of opportunities to allow them to reach their full potential (Figure 2). These include:

- One-to-one mentoring
- Well-being and physical activity sessions
- Volunteer and peer mentoring development such as sports activator training
- Access to a wider range of supporting local services based on their individual needs

Peer mentors work closely with Probation Officers and their clients to agree suitable action plans for participation in United Together. The Peer Mentors keep Probation Officers informed about client engagement and attendance throughout their participation in the programme. The Football Community Trusts provide a range of sport and physical activity sessions, and advice on health and nutrition. They have set up community hubs that participants could meet once a week. In these meetings, participants would have coffee or tea and a chat. After that, they go outside to the pitches and enjoy football with some friends. These meetings allow participants to socialise and expand their social networks.

Local available information and signposting is also utilised to provide participants with volunteering opportunities, work experience placements and help with preparing for employment.

Figure 2: The UT process model

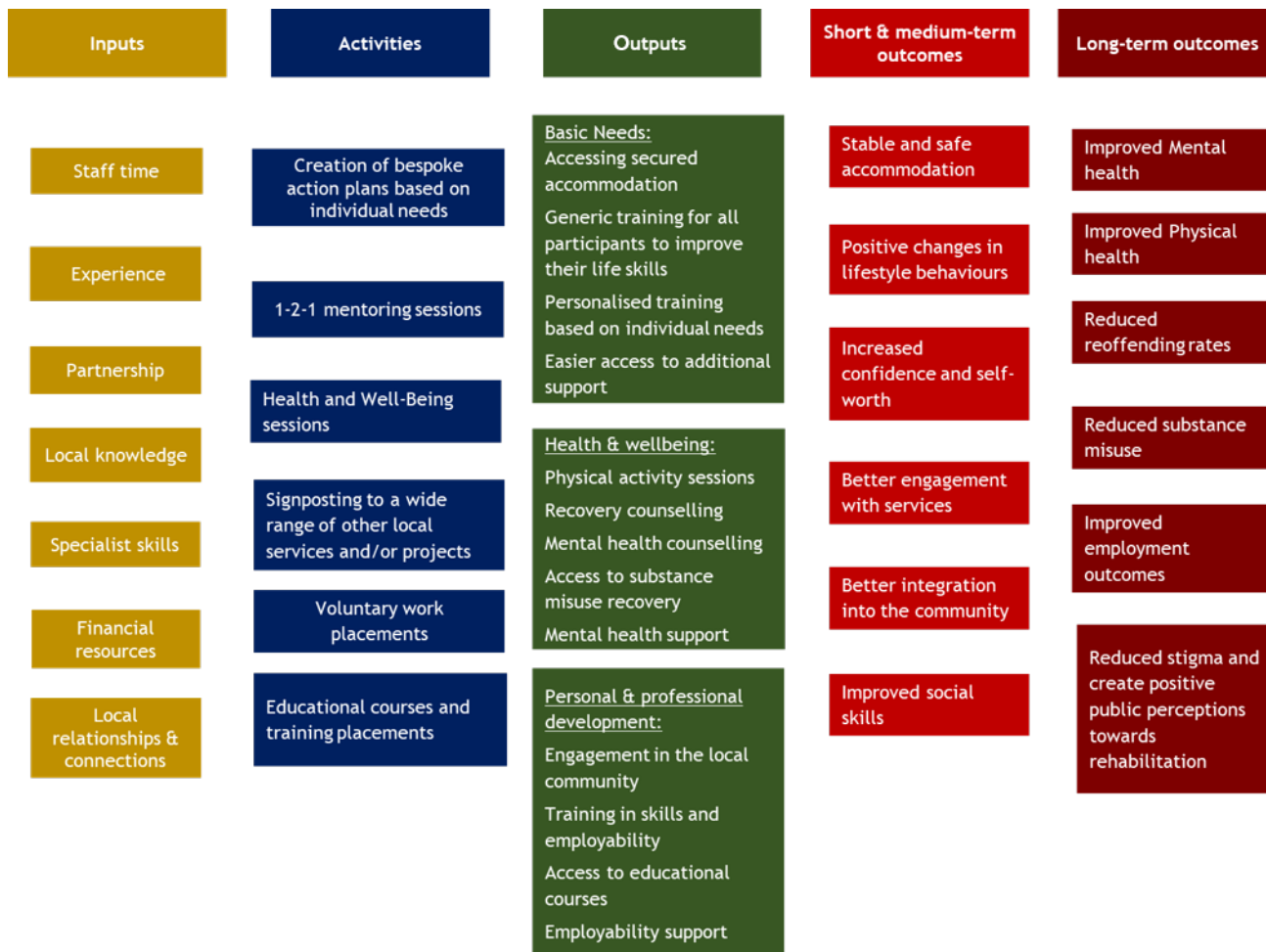


Theory of Change

The United Together project is designed to contribute to a wide range of outcomes for people in probation with the ultimate aim to reduce re-offending as shown in Figure 3.

It is anticipated that one-to-one mentoring and individual personal development plans would allow participants to identify their immediate needs. Setting achievable goals and prioritising them would benefit participants in staying focused and overcoming feelings of helplessness. Through sport and physical activity sessions, ex-offenders build their confidence and improve their team working and communication skills. Improvements in physical and mental wellbeing are anticipated as participants engage with the project in an informal, non-judgemental and supportive setting.

Figure 3: The United Together Theory of Change



About the evaluation

The evaluation of the project was conducted internally by Active Lancashire. The primary aim was to explore the changes the project had on participants' lives and how it shaped their behaviours, experiences and motivations. It draws upon a mix of qualitative and quantitative data gathered between 2019 and 2021. Specifically, the outcomes of the project were measured through:

- Monitoring data gathered during the whole duration of the project
- The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). The 14-item scale was administered at the beginning of the project (T1) and again after 6 weeks or at exit (T2)
- The Sport England Physical activity Single Item Metric (SIM)
- Individual case studies
- A focus group (n=4) and 2 one-to-one interviews with participants
- Interviews (n=6) with mentors, football community trusts workers and Probation Officers

The essence of the project

We asked participants and Probation Officers to tell us what is the most important element of the project and what makes it unique. For probation officers, the essence of the project was the different opportunities available for their clients; while for participants, it was the peer support that they received through the United Together mentors.

Probation Officers' comments

The ethos and the idea but also the person who works on the project...The whole ethos around activities, there is a massive gap in the market

Meaningful activities that allow people to feel part of the community again. The project it gives them a purpose. It gives them a purpose and confidence

It offers a number of different opportunities and covers a number of different areas. It allows participants to do something with their calendar. They get a mentor that shows them that there are different ways to live their lives. Some of them are stuck and it's about lift them up. It is not as formative as probation

Participants' comments

The support, the 1-2-1 support. It makes it feel more that it is for you. When you do the activities it is more of a group thing but with 1-2-1s is more about you and what you need help with. It just makes you feel useful

I think it is linking in with other agencies and things like that and other people. It just gives you that wider option and that better support

It makes it more of a personal thing, the people want to help you and not just to get you there for numbers...actually the people care about you, and they want you to succeed and they want to help you

I feel that I got more support on the out compare to any other time I have been released. Having chats like these. It's nice to have this support

About the participants

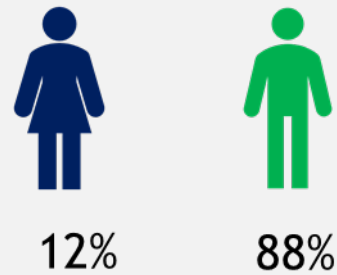
Participants were referred to the project by Probation Officers and an initial meeting was arranged between the Mentor, the Probation Officer and the participant. During the **18** months of the project, there were **250** referrals made, of which **204** expressed an interest and registered with the project.

The majority of the individuals referred to the project were male (**88%**) with only **12%** being female. The average age at referral was **35** years old with the youngest participant being **18** years old and the oldest **62**. Only **5%** were from a Black, Asian or other Ethnic Minority background.

Participants average stay in the project was approximately **15** weeks. This varied widely across participants with some needing less than the average time and some needing considerably more. Indeed some are still receiving on-going support.

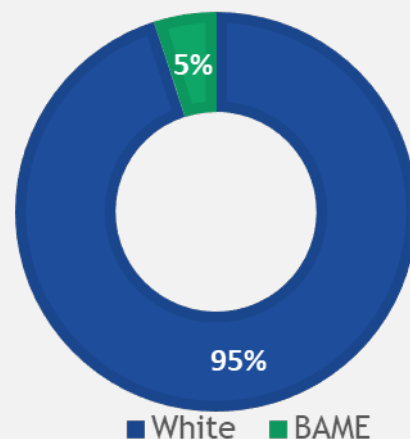
Average stay
15 weeks

Gender



Average Age
35 years old

Ethnicity



Reasons for referrals

During the first meeting, participants are asked to choose areas that they would like to improve upon, from a provided list. Then mentors, in collaboration with participants, create bespoke action plans. This is important to understand as ex-offenders have multiple complex needs. It allows us to provide better-tailored support and strengthen the partnership.

From a sample of **133** participants, we found that the majority of them wanted support to improve their mental health and wellbeing (**71%**). One in two needed employability support with a further **30%** in need of training or education and **20%** would like to develop through volunteering. A good proportion of participants (**45%**) wanted support in reducing their alcohol/drug intake and **50%** would like to improve their physical health. **53%** also needed some sort of housing support. Improving family relationships was another important need for **24%** of the participants with **29%** saying that they felt socially-isolated.

COVID-19 impact

The COVID-19 pandemic brought life to a stand-still. Interviews with participants during the lockdown have highlighted the

negative impact the lockdown had on their lives. For example, one participant described how he went from being a regular attender to the activity sessions, engaging with Inspire to tackle his addiction, and working with multi-agencies to get his children back to relapse.

“The truth with me is, I relapsed again during covid and that sort, I went off the rails for a bit but when it started dying back down I am back in track with probation and all that stuff.”

However, they also talked about how the project had thrown them a lifeline by mentors keeping in touch with them, providing them with volunteer opportunities or keeping engaged with activities.

“During COVID, Tamasin just asking me how I am getting on with the children and if I felt a little bit down she would pick me up but other than that there was not really anybody else.”

“I was getting bored really and Tamasin got me to call the clients and check on their wellbeing and things which I enjoyed that bit of it.”

Project outcomes

Reoffending data

“I don’t want to be in and out prison all my life, I want to make a change and I want to help other people in a similar situation and make sure they can change their lives as well”

A random sample check on participants showed that the re-offending rate amongst those engaged with the UT project was almost half (26%) compared to those who referred to the project but did not engaged (56%).

Specifically, from a sample of 34 participants who actively engaged with the UT project only 9 re-offended. On the contrary, from a sample of 27 people, who did not engaged with the project, 15 of them re-offended.

Having a closer look at the re-offending rates from 2018/2019¹, the re-offending rate of those engaged with the project is slightly lower than the proven re-offending rate in England (27%) and similar to the Lancashire one (26%). However, we need to take into account that the project was focused in areas with high re-offending rates.

For example, in 2018/2019 the proven reoffending rate in Blackpool, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Hyndburn, Lancaster, Fylde and Preston ranged between 29% and 35%, which indicates that the project had a positive impact.

A surprising find is how long it took the two groups to re-offend. The average time from entry for re-offending was 2.8 months for the engaged compared to 4.2 months for the disengaged group. It is difficult to explain why this happened. However, what we can take away from this finding is that there is a window of opportunity to prevent re-offending especially for the disengaged group but more research is needed to explore why those people do not engage with services.

Engaged group
26% re-offended

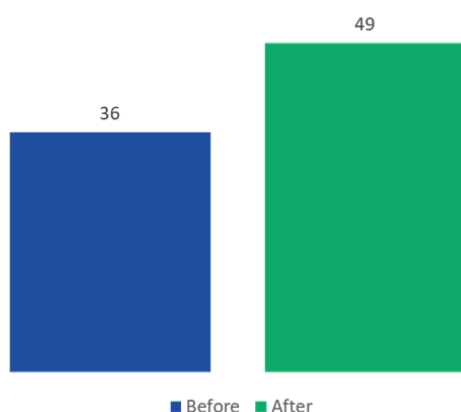
Disengaged group
56% re-offended

Mental wellbeing

“I have mental health issues and it helps me get over that. It’s good to connect, you go to activities with other people in the same situations. It puts you at ease. It makes me feel a lot more better mentally”

Changes in mental wellbeing were measured using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). Participants were asked to complete the initial questionnaire during their first or second meeting with the peer mentor and again a few weeks later, after they have engaged with the project and received support. 103 participants completed both questionnaires.

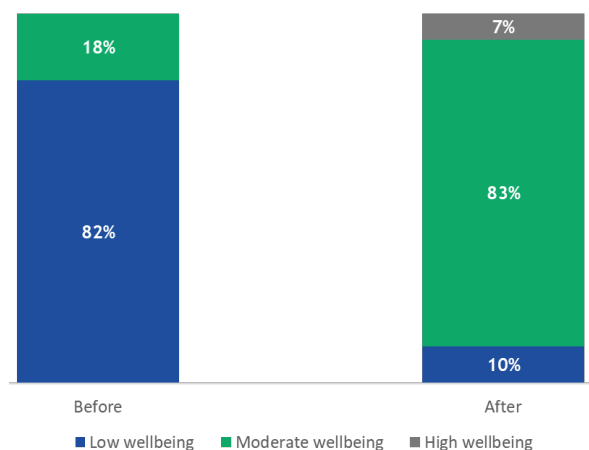
Figure 4: Mean overall score for mental wellbeing



Improvements in mental wellbeing were evidenced in participants’ scores. The overall

score for wellbeing was more positive after engaging with the project than at the point of referral, suggesting a positive direction of change (Figure 4). Specifically, the overall score increased by 13 points after receiving support from the United Together project.

Figure 5: Proportion of participants in each group



The graph above (Figure 5) shows that participation to the project significantly increased participants’ mental wellbeing and every single person made a meaningful positive change*, even those who their wellbeing score remained low. 82% of the participants had a low wellbeing at the beginning of the project which dropped to 10% after taking part in the project activities.

*A meaningful positive change means that there is a more than 3 points difference between before and after scores.

Case study: K's story

When K was referred to the project, he was on Tag, had a restraining order on his girlfriend, and was feeling extremely low, anxious, angry and ashamed about his conviction. He was isolating himself and it wasn't helping his anxiety.

Together with his Peer Mentor, they looked at many different services in the local area, Recovery College, More Positive Together but they felt they did not fit in with K's immediate needs. K needed a light touch approach that came with a Peer Mentor that could possibly meet him and take him to appointments and simply befriend him. He made his Peer Mentor aware that he really wanted to do something to help his stress, like a stress relief course or anger management.

K did fail to attend appointments and rarely answered his phone, he was disengaging and falling back into isolation which fed into his anxiety. At that moment, he was booked into a mandatory appointment with his Peer Mentor through his Probation Officer, where he had to attend. He presented himself as very anxious and isolated and at breaking point, he was tearful and very upset at himself, for in his opinion letting his son down, but the willingness was there he wanted to make changes and that was the start that was needed.

K was referred to the Empowerment Project. The project is a peer mentor project, that employs mentors with lived experience that will be-friend clients and help them make positive changes in their lives.

K was assigned a mentor, called John, his first appointment was to meet him in a local café for a cup of coffee, but K was not convinced, it took a lot of support and encouragement to get K to engage as he was so anxious. A photo of John was sent to K so that he felt more at ease by knowing who he was going to meet.

K did meet with his new mentor, and was supported with regular phone calls every step of the way, so he knew he wasn't alone. After his first appointment he did express that he was so happy that he pushed himself to go, and it wasn't as scary as he thought, he will be meeting him again, he is "over the moon".

K now meets his mentor weekly, in different locations to boost his confidence, he has made the biggest step by reducing his cannabis use and his isolation which in turn has reduced his anxiety. A plan is now in place and when K is ready, other options will be discussed to increase his confidence, supporting his parenting and eventually training or employment.

Physical wellbeing

The psychological and social benefits of Sport and Physical Activity have been well established, UT participants were given the opportunity to engage with the community football club trusts and take part in various physical and social activities.

“I got involved in various activities that kept my mind occupied (...) it’s built my confidence up”

“When I am active, when I am active with stuff like these, I know I can do it but if I am not active that’s my risk.”

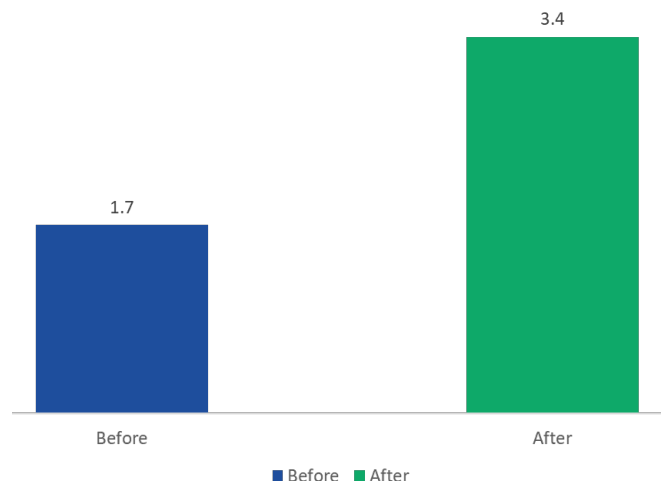
Each Football Community Trust established a Community Hub offering participants a regular routine and access to various social networks promoting social interaction. These networks proved to be vital for ex-offenders’ community integration, allowing participants to mix with a wide range of people.

“The football keeps me occupied and allows me to meet other people”

“Over the moon, love it. This smile is bigger when I am playing football”

At the beginning of the project, participants spent on average 1.7 days of doing Sport or Physical Activity. After a few weeks, their participation increased to 3.4 days, as shown in graph below (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Overall mean score for physical activity



Case study: L's story

L was being supported by Lancashire Women Centre. Due to a passion for football, L's Responsible Officer referred L to United Together to try and use football as a hook for engagement.

The Peer Mentor held a number of informal one to one sessions with L so they could get to know each other and their backgrounds, and to develop a simple way of working on things that L would like to develop.

Through these conversations L mentioned that she played lots of sport in the past and was currently going through her level 1 football qualifications. Through this connection, L was encouraged to attend the football sessions at the United Together hub in Burnley which is supported by Burnley FC in the Community. From this, L showcased some really great hidden talents with her football skills and engagement skills with other participants.

L did have challenges traveling to football. Through discussions with the CRC, the Peer Mentor was able to resolve these travel issues and L is now an integral part of the regular football sessions.

L gets involved in a range of areas including informally volunteering, taking part, supporting others and receiving 1 to 1 support from the United Together Mentor.

During the lockdown L has been a great motivator for the other participants by getting involved in the United Together / Challenge through Sport Initiative online offer (Couch to Out). Supporting people via the Whatsapp support group, L has even set up online challenges for others to try as part of this virtual social offer.

After the lockdown L will hopefully continue volunteering and move towards getting level 2 in coaching whilst also encouraging and motivating other women to get involved in football and other activities.

Other outcomes

Employment

The barriers ex-offenders face in securing employment are well-documented. Through the project, participants were supported with job search and basic skills training and were also able to receive vocational guidance. During the project, 36 participants (18%) were able to obtain sustainable employment. Recent data released by the Ministry of Justice show that between January 2019 and March 2020², only 12% of offenders released from custody and were available to work were employed.

Case study: J's story

J was supported by the United Together Mentor who arranged informal meetings to help understand J's immediate and long-term goals. J was excited and motivated by the prospect of being connected into his local professional football club. J's main goals included engaging in the community and gaining employment. Through one to one meetings, it was identified that J had a keen interest in gym and fitness. The Mentor then used his local knowledge and connections to arrange to attend regular gym sessions together, at Xercise4less in Burnley.

As an additional incentive for J, it was agreed with his Case Worker that if he attended 4 consecutive weeks he would not need to see his

Case Worker for those 4 weeks, as the gym sessions with the Mentor would be classed as contact time.

J committed to this and really engaged with the fitness programme. In agreement with his Mentor, he even invited a friend along to the gym sessions who supported him re-engaging into community activity.

Through informal discussions at the gym, J's long term goals were discussed regarding employment. At this point the Mentor introduced J to Burnley FC in the Community who have a series of existing programmes and projects focusing on employability skills. An IT Skills course was identified through discussions with Burnley FC in the Community which J attended for a number of weeks.

After a four-week period, the engagement with J suddenly stopped. The United Together Mentor contacted his CRC Case Worker to follow this up and discovered that J had been successful in gaining employment with a local firm in Burnley. United Together provided J with a platform to help positive life choices, build confidence and engage in meaningful experiences within the community; all supported by his local professional football club.

Case study: M's story

M lost his job as a taxi driver, due to an alcohol-related offence. When he was referred to the project, he thought that his life was over as he had lost his career. With the support of the project he turned his life around. M has now addressed his drinking problem and he is working in a supermarket.

Case study: B's story

B was referred to the project during the pandemic. She was anxious, depressed and socially isolated. Her 2 children were taken away from her and that had a big impact on her mental health. Through the project she slowly started engaging with a local football club and was also referred to the More Positive Together employability project. Her mental wellbeing has improved and she is currently setting up her own cleaning company.

Case study: RB's story

RB was referred to United Together from his Rehabilitation Officer at CRC. Initially RB wouldn't engage, but with time, contact was made and a relationship was gradually formed.

RB's reluctance to engage stemmed from paranoia he had following an attack he sustained, in addition to bad social anxiety, exacerbated by the isolation the COVID-19 restrictions had placed on everyone.

Once RB started to engage, he shared he was keen on playing football so it was suggested that he attended one of the Leisure Box football sessions linked to Burnley Football Club. He was apprehensive at first, but agreed to come along and try it out and transport was arranged to and from the session for him.

He loved the activity and participated in the full hour session, following which he went and bought his own boots, shin pads and socks ready for the next session. RB continued to engage via text between sessions, where he mentioned he was keen to find employment using his Fork Li Truck driving license. He has been referred into the More Positive Together programme to access 1-2-1 mentoring around employability support and creating a new CV.

RB has made great progress in a short space of time, rebuilding relationships, overcoming fears and anxiety, and taking the right steps towards finding employment.

Education & Training

39% of participants enrolled in education or participated in training based on their individual needs. Through accessing education and a wide range of training, participants were able to improve their skills, confidence and employment prospects.

Case study: A's story

A had a history of substance misuse, drinking a litre of vodka a day and was committing crimes to feed his addiction. Three years on the street and the constant abuse to his body resulted in him ending up in hospital for 3 months. At this time, he weighed just 4st as he started his rehabilitation and has been left with a chronic life-threatening liver disease.

A was linked to United Together through Probation, to give him the opportunity to link in with activities and to meet new peers. A had poor mental health so he was referred to WRAP (NHS) to help him stabilise and understand what he was experiencing and believe he could achieve goals, such as finding employment.

The UT Peer Mentor supported A to identify his goals and his training needs were identified. He was supported through a number of short courses including; nutrition to improve his health, IT, Customer Service Skills, Skills for Work and Life .

These new skills improved A's confidence and he volunteered to support others in similar situations as himself. A also attended further training to improve his social skills. He attended online classes to learn on how to answer a phone, how to act when in a meeting, how to prepare yourself for a meeting, and motivational interviewing. As he was also facilitating activities having completed his First Aid, Safeguarding Adults and Children, Managing Challenging Behaviour and a L2 Multi Skills Tutor award.

The UT Peer Mentor worked with DWP and A was given permitted hours to allow him to be introduced back into the workplace. He applied and was offered a 10 hour job that fits with his current long term health conditions.

Housing

Data from the MoJ shows that in 2019/2020³, only **50%** on release from custody were in settled or probation accommodation. Through the duration of the project **39%** of the participants received housing support, enabling them access secure, safe and suitable accommodation. The majority of people needing housing support occurred during the first half of the project's delivery. During the second half of the project the need for housing support reduced significantly.

Case study: Cs' story

C had just experienced a relationship breakdown, following which he found himself homeless and living in his van until it was taken away due to it being untaxed.

C went to his Local Authority but they couldn't rehome him. They gave him a list of landlords to contact but he found himself unable to follow up as he had no phone or money. The only option C had was to sleep on the streets, in doorways, parks and in tents. This event caused an increase in substance misuse and his life was spiraling out of control.

Through the support of the United Together Peer Mentor, C was secured a place in Walter Lyon House (secure supported housing), a place where he could live in

A substance free environment which empowers residents to find a new healthier and more structured way to live.

Through the strong relationship Active Lancashire has with Calico, who runs Walter Lyon House, they were able to give C a good reference and assurances that Active Lancashire will continue to support C, on his journey to employment and secure accommodation. C threw himself into the project and was able to utilise his skills as a painter and decorator by engaging with the grounds maintenance project run at Morecambe FC Community Trust serving to re-spark his passion and motivation. During meetings with his Peer Mentor, C expressed that he really wanted this to work and wanted to become drug free in order to keep to his conditions with probation and in his accommodation. An action plan was pulled together which consisted of filling pockets of time with positive activities where C would normally be bored and struggle.

He is keen to start his own boxing community session, and is currently looking for boxing instructor courses, so he can facilitate his own session in Lancaster. He has gone from strength to strength. From living on the streets and bringing his worldly belongings to appointments to now living in stable supported housing and moving towards the employment market is a great success for C.

Volunteering

Only 13 participants took a volunteering role while in the project (1%). A possible explanation of the low uptake may be due to the fact that participants do not feel ready to take a role with some increased responsibilities or it may be the fact that their conviction is a barrier. Research shows that a very common barrier to volunteering is the lack of support. A possible explanation of why ex-offenders do not take on volunteering roles. Also, COVID-19 restrictions should be taken into account.

However, those who became volunteers found their roles rewarding, allowing them to develop and flourish.

“I started volunteering in January and I just went from strength to strength from there really. I just found something that I liked doing. I like helping others, I like working with people”

Case study: R's story

R is a middle-aged man, who was trapped in his house for 2 years. He was falling through the cracks as due to a halt to face-to-face meetings, his alcohol abuse went unnoticed. In one of their visits, the United Together Peer Mentor noticed his alcohol dependence and supported him in addressing his issues. He is now registered with a GP and a Dentist.

He has started counselling for his mental health issues and volunteers once a week.



Conclusions & recommendations

The United Together project supports ex-offenders in probation to reach their full potential by providing a pathway of personal and professional development with the ultimate aim of reducing re-offending. The evidence gathered so far illustrates that there is a real need for this project. This is reflected in the high volume of referrals as well as in the positive views expressed by participants and Probation Officers.

The partnership provided participants with a wide range of development opportunities from soft skills to professional training. Additionally, Peer Mentors' local knowledge and connections to a wide range of services strengthen the partnership providing a well-rounded support to participants' complex needs. Specifically, the project acted as a gateway for ex-offenders to access local services that supported specific needs such as housing, employment and training.

Through one-to-one mentoring, participants were able to receive support that was tailored to their individual needs. This allowed participants to flourish and see significant improvements in their physical and mental wellbeing.

One of the strength of the project was Peer Mentors' 'lived experience' that allowed them to form trusted relationships with each participant. Peer Mentors acted as role models who provided constant support and encouragement.

Recommendations

- Strengthening the partnership could lead to better outcomes, especially for those with substance misuse issues and complex needs
- Strengthening the partnership to meet more diverse needs
- Recognising that not all individuals referred to the project would benefit from it as they may not be ready to engage or may need more time
- Recognition of the value of the constant presence of peer mentors and the importance of the support and encouragement they provide.

References

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