

# Improving ex-offenders' lives: a rapid process evaluation of the United Together project

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## Background

People in contact with the criminal justice system are likely to experience significant health inequalities. There are strong links between offending behaviour and a higher prevalence of complex health and social needs, low levels of help seeking behaviours, and an increased risk of premature death (Revolving Doors, 2017). It is well established that the prison population have poorer physical and mental health than the general population, and that this has been attributed to social disadvantage and inequitable access to services that meet this population's needs (Kinner & Young, 2018; Health & Social Care Committee, 2018).

Upon their release from prison, many ex-offenders are faced with a wide range of barriers that have a further detrimental impact on both their physical and mental health (Burgess-Allen et al., 2006). Factors such as a lack of continuity of care, stigma associated with being in prison, alcohol and substance misuse issues, social isolation, lack of educational attainment, and housing issues influence the extent to which ex-offenders are able to successfully reintegrate into society (Buck et al., 2021; Tarpay & Friend, 2016). As of September 2019, almost a third of adult offenders released from custody reoffended within a one-year follow-up period (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Evidence suggests that the barriers to community reintegration often lead to this increased chance of reoffending (Tarpay & Friend, 2016; Tyler & Brockmann, 2018).

Improving the physical and mental health of ex-offenders and reducing the number re-offending is high on the agenda. The Ministry of Justice (2020) recognises developing and delivering effective interventions and programmes to improve the life chances of people leaving prison as a key area of research interest. Addressing the effects of inequalities experienced by ex-offenders such as securing safe accommodation, accessing education and training opportunities, gaining employment and adequate health care provision including substance misuse recovery is noted to be critical to improving the health and wellbeing of this population (Revolving Doors, 2017; National Offender Management Service, 2004). Therefore, interventions which effectively meet the needs of people leaving prison and support them to reintegrate into society are likely to take a holistic approach and involve a range of agencies. Building and maintaining close partnership working has been recommended to successfully implement 'through-the-gate' provision (Morris, 2016).

Peer-mentoring programmes within prison settings, whereby prisoners provide education, support or advice to other prisoners, are considered to contribute to improving the health and wellbeing of offenders (Bagnall et al., 2015; South et al., 2014). Fletcher and Batty (2012) reported on the strengths of peer-mentoring programmes; indicating that offenders were more likely to engage with peers than professional staff, and that offenders viewed peers as 'role models' which had increased their motivation to participate in rehabilitation programmes.

Within prison settings, participation in sport and physical activity is increasingly being recognised as a way to improve the health and wellbeing of offenders, and reduce reoffending rates (Ministry of Justice, 2018). An independent review of sport in youth and adult prisons in the UK highlighted that the provision of these activities can promote offender health and provide opportunities for offenders to develop skills that support reintegration into society (Ministry of Justice, 2018).

Despite evidence that peer-mentoring programmes and sport-based interventions within prison settings can positively influence offender health and reduce reoffending, there is limited

evidence of their application for individuals leaving prison and the use of them in conjunction with each other. In addition, though partnership working has been identified as supportive to successfully implementing interventions to improve ex-offender health and reducing reoffending, how partner organisations work together and the factors that can influence partnership working has been largely understudied in this area.

ARC NWC is a nationally funded applied research programme that aims to improve outcomes for patients and the public through collaboration and co-production, by bringing together academics, health and social care organisations, members of the public, universities and local authorities. Its aim is to improve the quality, delivery and efficiency, reduce health inequalities and increase the sustainability of the health and care system both locally and nationally. Organisations are encouraged to submit research ideas which then receive support from university research teams funded by the ARC NWC. This project idea was submitted by Active Lancashire, a member organisation, and was supported by ARC NWC through this route.

Active Lancashire is a multi-agency organisation that aims to increase participation in, and widen access to, sport and physical activity across Lancashire. The organisation leads and facilitates projects and programmes in this region through partnership working, all underpinned by three key areas of focus: engage in sport, improve health, and inspire communities. One example is the United Together project, which provides a peer mentor intervention and access to sport and physical activity sessions to prison leavers in Lancashire to reduce re-offending rates, and improve their health and wellbeing.

### **The United Together project**

The United Together project began in 2019 as a joint initiative between Active Lancashire, the Cumbria Lancashire Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC), and seven Community Football Trusts in Lancashire. The project aims to use a holistic approach to engaging with prison leavers to support them overcome the barriers they are faced with on release from prison and reduce the likelihood of them reoffending. The delivery model of the United Together project was shaped in consultation with various stakeholders including prison leavers, prison guards and probation staff, which provided valuable insight into the need for rounded support to address the needs of prison leavers, to increase chances of successful reintegration, and to change re-offending behaviour.

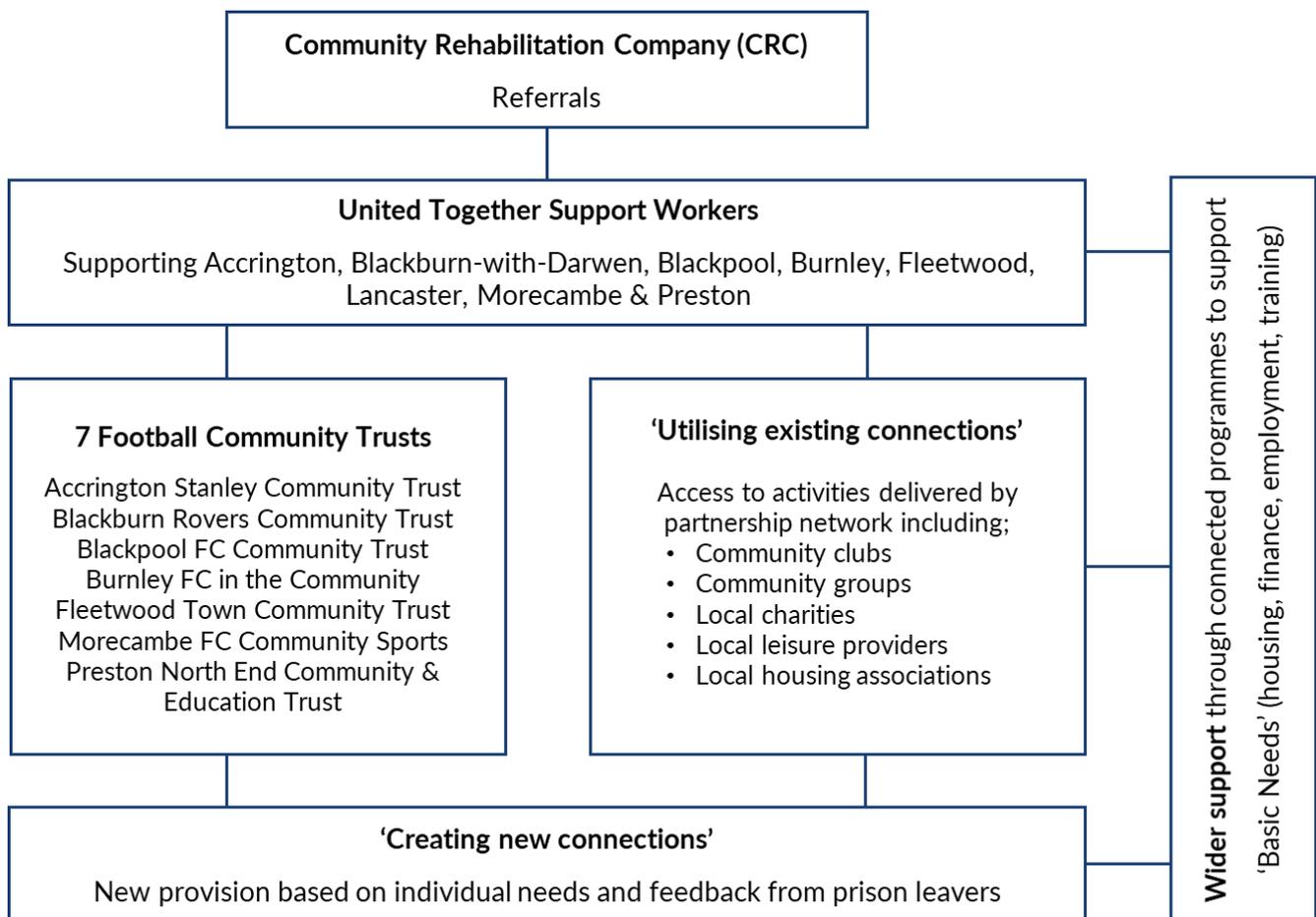
Referrals to United Together are received from the CRC to Active Lancashire. An initial meeting is organised between the probation officer, prison leaver and a peer mentor with lived experience of the criminal justice system. Peer mentors develop personalised action plans with each prison leaver and signpost them to a range of targeted support available in the community. Prison leavers are offered ongoing one-to-one and group sessions with peer mentors to maintain engagement and continue to build trust.

To supplement the peer mentoring offer, a range of support and activities are provided by other organisations who are delivery partners in the project. The Community Football Trusts offer sport and wellbeing sessions for prison leavers to increase their engagement in physical activity. The rationale behind these types of sessions is that participation in sport and physical activity not only has a positive impact on physical and mental health, but can also positively contribute to other areas such as reducing reoffending through the mechanism of team building. Housing associations are involved in securing accommodation for prison leavers from day 1 of release and supporting them to resettle into the community. Prison leavers are also supported to access

activities to make connections within the community (e.g. social groups, volunteering) and are linked into wider support from specialist providers (e.g. substance addiction recovery, education and training, housing and benefit advice).

For those who have participated in the project, Active Lancashire have observed improvements in overall mental wellbeing as measured by the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) and increased participation in physical activity. There are also indications from a check of reoffending rates that those who engaged with the project were less likely to re-offend than those who did not engage. These emerging patterns of positive outcomes for the project's participants suggest it's success in improving prison leavers' health and wellbeing, and reducing reoffending rates. Given the multi-faceted nature of the delivery model (Figure 1) and the partnerships required between the range of organisations involved, it is important to understand the factors that have influenced the project's success, and generate learning to support improvements to the delivery model and the partnerships.

Figure 1. The United Together Delivery Model



## About the research

This report outlines findings from a rapid process evaluation of Active Lancashire's United Together project. To complement the quantitative data that Active Lancashire have collected to measure the success of United Together, qualitative research was undertaken by researchers from the NIHR ARC NWC to explore the factors influencing the project's success. More specifically, the evaluation aimed to explore the following research questions:

- 1) How has the United Together project been implemented across Lancashire and how have partners worked together in facilitating the delivery of the project?
- 2) What are the key elements that have made the project successful, including what barriers and facilitators are there to the partnership working and what was the value of the partnership?
- 3) Is the project sustainable and easily replicated in other areas?

During August and September 2021, semi-structured interviews ( $n=9$ ) and focus groups ( $n=2$ ) were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams or over the telephone with representatives from the partner organisations involved in managing and delivering the United Together project (Active Lancashire, North West Probation Service, Football Trust, Preston Prison). Individuals in strategic roles ( $n=6$ ), and individuals in delivery roles ( $n=8$ ) across these organisations were asked to reflect on their experiences of United Together in individual interviews or small focus groups. Topics included the value of the partnership, barriers and facilitators to partnership working and to the delivery of the project, perceived outcomes for ex-offenders, and the sustainability of the project. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by an independent contractor. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, was used to analyse anonymised transcripts from the interviews and focus groups, and key themes were identified to understand factors influencing the project's success.

Ethical approval for this research was gained from Lancaster University Faculty of Health and Medicine's Ethics Committee in August 2021. Direct quotations are used in this report to illustrate key themes in the findings. Any reference to an individual's role or organisation has been removed from these quotations in order to protect anonymity.

## Main findings

The findings are organised around two components of the United Together model – 1) Delivery and 2) Partnership working. Delivery relates to how staff view the model; perceptions of what works in practice and how strategies might impact on prison leavers; how acceptable the various components are to staff working on the project; what are the key components of the delivery model and what aspects might be adaptable based on contextual features. Partnership working relates to how individuals and organisations work together to deliver the strategic aims of the project.

We have summarised the key themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups, and have further categorised these into sub-themes.

### **Delivery:**

- *What is working successfully and why?* (Individual characteristics; Relationship building with prison leavers; Accessibility and sustained delivery; Community Football Trust involvement; Physical activity as a vehicle for change)
- *What are the barriers to successful delivery?* (Safeguarding and risk assessment; Clarity on Community Football Trust offering)
- *Contextual Factors* (Covid-19; Sustainability)

### **Partnership working** (some overlap with themes presented under “Delivery”):

- *What is working successfully and why?* (Building professional networks; Communication facilitating relationship building; Partnership being made up of relevant skill mix)
- *Learning and developing* (Planning and information sharing; Implementing a long-term shared approach)

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the above findings in the same format.

Table 1. Summary of findings for the delivery of the United Together project

Theme	Sub-theme	Summary of responses
What is working successfully and why?	Individual characteristics	Lived experience of peer mentors Staff enthusiasm and integrity
	Relationship building with prison leavers	Perseverance of peer mentors Taking a person-centred approach
	Accessibility and sustained delivery	Convenient location close to public transport Inclusive approaches to referrals
	Community Football Trust involvement	Credibility and wide appeal of well-known football clubs Quality of the facilities offered
	Physical activity as a vehicle for change	Appropriate use of free time Learning new skills
What are the barriers to successful delivery?	Safeguarding and risk assessment	Differing views of risk between criminal justice services and community football trusts Online system provides insufficient detail to assess risk
	Clarity on Community Football Trust offering	Partnership organisations from the criminal justice sector unsure of the services on offer and what will be expected of prison leavers Partnership organisations from the criminal justice sector expected services to be targeted exclusively at the people they refer
Wider contextual factors	COVID-19 pandemic	Services reduced due to pandemic restrictions impacted on the ability to deliver Community Football Trust services Peer mentor's continuation of service delivery during the pandemic was much valued
	Sustainability	Funding viewed as short-term and inadequate

Table 2. Summary of findings for the partnership working in the United Together project

Theme	Sub-theme	Summary of responses
What is working successfully and why?	Building professional networks	Good personal relationships lead to successful referrals and signposting
	Communication facilitating relationship building	Good practice regarding communication included regular meetings supplemented with ad-hoc calls for specific advice and information sharing when needed
	Partnership being made up of relevant skill mix	Each organisation respected as being experts in their own field The partnership organisations have the relevant complementary skills to deliver this programme
Learning and developing	Planning and information sharing	Clear, documented agreements on key areas of working (e.g. sharing information, referral procedures, risk assessments, clarity around roles and service offers) should be developed from the start of intervention delivery
	Implementing a long-term shared approach	All partner organisations should be involved in strategic planning and decision making and kept up to date on developments All partner organisations should share information on funding opportunities and collaborate on applications

Key themes developed from the data are discussed below and are further categorised according to the sub-themes presented in the tables above. Quotations that provide insight into each of the themes and subthemes are also provided to support the findings presented. The source of each quotation is provided in brackets.

## Delivery

What is working successfully and why?

### *Characteristics of effective staff*

Partner representatives felt that staff with lived experience of the issues prison leavers face is vital for initial and sustained engagement and building relationships with prison leavers. Staff were perceived to be credible sources of information and a support that prison leavers could relate to and appreciate. In turn, these staff members were seen as having a greater appreciation of prison leavers' needs and experience, such as stigmatisation and negative public attitudes.

*I've been on probation myself like 20 years ago, I was full of guilt and shame and it's a lived experience that makes these take your badge off [...] I'm just a normal person, come and talk to me, get on a level with me and that is what makes the United Together project, it's the mentor's lived experience*

*I'll add I think is a really strong part to the project that you've got it led ultimately by individuals that have got you know been within the system before [...] and they can able to talk about real life experiences and I think that was a key part of the programme*

Partner representatives also felt it important that peer mentors received the right training and development in order for them to apply their lived experience in a way that was acceptable to prison leavers.

*You can go out and get a mentor and all day long and advertise for mentors, but it's lived experience, you've got to get the right mentor [...] I've had mentors go into probation and not being far enough developed [...] you've got to be adaptable, so you've got to share your lived experience*

Knowledge of and links to the local community were also valued in those staff members with lived experience. This meant that they were able to signpost to the appropriate organisations and therefore enhance the support that the project's participants received.

*I think a massive factor is the sort of peer support by people that have been in similar positions so you know you've got [staff member name] in particular [...] has been in prison before and been able to talk about [their] own experiences and [...] able to say, "I've been where you've been and now I'm here and this is what I did to get here" and I feel like that's so powerful and it's key and it works really well*

Partner representatives felt that enthusiasm and passion for the role, a caring nature and the ability to communicate these qualities to enthuse and engage prison leavers were useful characteristics for staff delivering this programme to possess.

*I think you know the personalities helped, I think [staff member name] was really, really excellent, really enthusiastic about the project and I think that often helps and I think being in the office and being visible and being really enthusiastic was brilliant*

Moreover, partner representatives felt that effective staff members were respected by prison leavers when they displayed integrity through portraying a sensible, reliable and consistent approach to their work and that in turn led to better relationships.

*... he's brilliant, you know a lot of the lads turn up for him because they've got that relationship with him, because he's really good at what he does. And I think I work really well with [staff member name] as well, and I think they kind of you know this yeah I think they find us quite honourable and reliable and you know we're there to change and help and support and they see that, I think that's why it's a success*

*I think he's got a lot of common sense, I think he's a really likeable personable person, who builds relationships and people warm to him because he's open, he's honest, and he gets involved, and he cares, and his enthusiasm is just unbelievable and I think you need that, if you've not got that you kind of I think you're fighting a losing battle with a lot of people that would probably come from a background of suspicion*

### ***Relationship building with prison leavers***

Partner representatives felt that in addition to the above characteristics, effective staff members need to be persistent in their approach to engaging prison leavers. Probation in particular felt that peer mentors' willingness to persist in working with prison leavers who would not initially respond to the programme was key in ultimately engaging them, building relationships and encouraging successful outcomes. This might also involve developing personalised support through being sensitive to prison leaver's personal needs (such as mental health). This was particularly valued by probation officers as their resources limited the amount of engagement work they were able to do with prison leavers.

*I think they work in a way they kind of it's a bit of that system challenge, so I think they're very good at trying to sort of navigate some of those mental health pathways, they're good at trying to support that person where they need to get to, and they don't give up and I think with for all of us, whatever your role is, that's really important with the people we work with 'cos it might take six times before somebody goes do you know what I've had enough of this bouncing in and out of prison, but if you keep going with somebody they're much more likely to get to that point where they'd say right ok enough's enough*

Partner representatives reported that a person-centred approach to working with prison leavers was vital to building sustained relationships with prison leavers. This involved being non-judgemental, assessing prison leavers' needs and developing a tailored package of support in response to these needs. This could demonstrate to prison leavers that staff members genuinely cared about their needs and that they were important. The impact of this approach was felt to be prison leavers being more likely to try new approaches and follow recommendations from staff.

*I think in a way it was looking at people's interests, yeah, so rather than it being something that and I didn't really enforce it, so you know I didn't say if you don't go to that appointment you're going to go to court, you know it's a probation appointment, because*

*it was more of an option, so that was a real benefit to it, and the fact that it was to try and encourage people to take up a hobby*

### **Accessibility and sustained delivery**

Partner representatives reported that the location of sessions needed to be convenient and connected to public transport routes ideally in places that were familiar to prison leavers, such as town centres.

*We put on a weekly session in the centre of [town name] so that it were easy for them to get to*

The probation service in particular felt the easy referral process facilitated prison leavers' access to the service and increased the likelihood of them referring.

*Accessibility wise, you put them forward, they'd get a space, it wasn't you know it was open to all which was really good, really good*

Furthermore, a policy of not turning anyone away meant that partner representatives felt that the service was more likely to achieve positive outcomes for more challenging prison leavers.

*Yeah so the accessibility yeah everybody, I don't remember her turning anybody away*

*What makes it successful is building trust with each client and being proactive [...] what made us successful compared to other agencies, we would always find somewhere for them to go, even if they was a sex offender, you know even if there was nowhere we could send them, we would always, we wouldn't give up*

Active Lancashire continued to provide support to prison leavers during the COVID-19 pandemic and this continuation of service was valued by representatives from the probation service. They felt that many prison leavers, particularly those who faced barriers accessing online services would have been excluded from accessing support without this continuity. In addition, there was a perception that online contact with prison leavers may result in cues being missed that were subsequently picked up by the face to face contact.

*Other people, the probation service couldn't go out face to face to see people, we could. So they weren't allowed, so they were ringing people up that were presenting really well on the phone, but I was seeing them face to face, reporting back to probation saying no they are not at all well, you know and they were lacking, 'cos they weren't allowed out*

*When we were in a period especially in COVID where we were going oh we're not visiting anyone, we're not going out, and they were kind of knocking up on doors and going '[...] it would be really good to get you into the recovery', you know so that worked, that was [...] good*

### **Community Football Trust involvement**

Involvement of the Community Football Trusts was seen as a key component of the wider project. Partner representatives felt that initially, association with a successful football club acted

as a “hook” for prison leavers to engage with the service. It was also important to get buy in from probation officers, which led to more referrals into the programme from probation.

*It was the pull of the badge, so you'd sit in a probation office and you'd be like right [person's name], do you like football? Yeah I'm a [football club] supporter, right come on, we'll go and get you tickets, we'll go and get you volunteering, so that was really good, the pull of the badge, we had a big badge behind us*

*There's no denying that people hear a football club are involved and it's like oh yeah I want to be involved with them so I think you know it's a really good sort of way to get people engaged*

Moreover, the football clubs involved offered highly desirable resources and facilities and were able to provide opportunities for prison leavers such as volunteering and attending matches that were well-received. Partner representatives felt that the overall service offer was augmented through association with a well-known football club and the related quality of resources on offer.

*It was the badge and they had the facilities and if the right person went along to the football club, there was endless amounts of support they could get. So say if someone went that was pretty good, like not many complex needs, they'd sail along, they could volunteer, they could go and be a mascot, they could get tickets if the right person went along, so that was really good*

*We've got some really good facilities on site at the stadium, the club are brilliant, we obviously rent certain kind of areas of the stadium that is for Community Trust use only but you know we've got access to the pitch side to deliver sessions, we've got access to the concourse which again is kind of makes the client kind of feel a bit empowered*

### **Physical activity as a vehicle for change**

An excess of free time was perceived by partner representatives as being linked to re-offending and physical activity was viewed as integral to the overall intervention as it provided a productive and beneficial way for prison leavers to spend their time.

*We got people active, we got them doing something, filling their time productively, you know with positive stuff*

Partner representatives also reported that prison leavers' participation in physical activity provided a myriad of opportunities for peer and social support, which was perceived as being therapeutic and key for reducing reoffending.

*It gives you a regular activity that you're doing each week, you're building confidence within that, you know, while they're playing the lads just have discussions with themselves about how the week's been and all the rest of it which is really good for me 'cos it's like they're self-helping one another [...] it's all positive, constructive stuff*

Partner representatives also felt that group activities could promote a sense of wellbeing and belonging to a wider community. This could apply to support and other physical activity such as volunteer work.

*If people are attending sessions there they genuinely do feel a part of something, do you know what I mean, so it's about that sense of belonging and stuff... if you feel a part of your community you're more than likely going to take pride in your community when you were away from that football session in your everyday lives.*

Partner representatives felt that by offering a variety of physical activities, prison leavers were provided with opportunities to try new activities and learn new skills that could be integrated into their programme of rehabilitation.

*I suppose that the model that we've delivered in that sense [...] trying to empower them and inspire them a bit, give them a taste of something that maybe is new to them or that they used to enjoy, and trying to for them to sustain that really*

What are the barriers to successful delivery?

### ***Safeguarding and risk assessment***

Partner representatives reported different levels of acceptable risk between services that was seen as largely dependent on the level of experience of staff from each organisation. When prison leavers were not accepted by an organisation or service, there was a perception that it could lead to stigmatisation or disengagement. For example, Community Football Trust staff were mostly unused to working with ex-offenders therefore it was viewed they could be more risk-adverse than staff from other partner organisations.

*They hadn't really worked with these kind of people at all, and actually there were some real barriers started to go up, you know they were really quite risk averse and you know quite worried about it all*

*We had to really handhold them and really reassure them and a lot of the referrals were bounced back because they were just quite hesitant, they'd never done this nature of work before*

Safeguarding was a concern for some Community Football Trust staff and in some circumstances, the level of risk involved in providing other services in spaces shared with prison leavers was unclear.

*This week alone for example we've got our inclusion camp running which is young people with disabilities, we have a school, a college, a traineeship on site, so it can be tricky delivering sessions to adults that have got a history of crime when you've got vulnerable young people or vulnerable adults in the same building or on the same site. So we've got to be really clever of how we deliver that and that's probably one of our own challenges*

*I think they said the fact that they are with the [organisation name], they are low to medium risk so but for me I like to rather than taking someone's word for that, I'd rather see that you know clearly. And again it's not to say that oh we can't work with them people 'cos they're too high risk or whatever, it's more just that we're informed and we can put things in place*

Partner representatives reported that safeguarding might be addressed by the data management system used by the organisations (Views), however this platform was unpopular with some and it was felt that insufficient detail to assess risk levels was available.

*Some of the ones that we got where they were open to me on Views it were just saying, low to medium risk, mental health, and I was like, "what does that mean though, like again I don't need a list of all your offences but you know it could have said history of violence or history of kind of assault, robbery, just something so I could think right ok [...] I can safeguard myself and I know how to protect myself but my challenge is the fact that there's so much going on at the club and the fact that we are a football club ... we've got the reputation of a football club to uphold as well as obviously safeguarding all the other kind of young people and other participants for the programme*

*As I said Views has been a bit of a challenge, I'm not a fan of Views anyway but even as I said the past few month or two now it's been down so I've struggled ... I've not been able to access any of their information anyway so that's probably prevented us working with a couple of people the past month or two because you know rightly or wrongly I'm not just going to invite someone into the club that we don't know who they are apart from a name and a number*

Concerns around safeguarding could be in conflict with the need to protect the privacy of prison leavers. Partner representatives had some concerns around sharing data relating to individuals. Some barriers to data sharing were around data protection, but also some felt they had an ethical duty to withhold details relating to the criminal history of prison leavers.

*So it's not for us to then share and they think you're being funny, at times and don't understand why we're not disclosing [...] their offending history. But that's like everything else isn't it, it's data protection as well so it's not for us to all be and why do we need to, we're supposed to be giving them a second chance aren't we?*

Partner representatives reported that the tension around sharing sensitive information about prison leavers and the consequent perception of insufficient safeguarding measures might have led to prison leavers missing opportunities to benefit from Community Football Trusts' services.

*Participants did leave some of the Trusts because of the way they were treated, yeah early on because it was a case of lack of contact, or they were very wary, they wouldn't bring them into the actual clubs, it was like I can't meet you in there and then they wouldn't meet them on their own and then they always wanted to meet them with us*

### **Clarity of Community Football Trusts offering**

Some partner representatives (probation officers and peer mentors) expressed some uncertainty around the activities on offer from the Community Football Trusts. This meant that they were unable to pass this information on to prison leavers, resulting in them presenting at the football clubs without knowing what activities were on offer.

*I think it could have been brilliant, I just I don't know whether it was well advertised enough, I didn't really understand even myself, somebody that was a link, I didn't really understand what was on offer [...] I think they were just turning up and it they weren't really sure what they were getting involved in*

Some partner representatives felt that they and maybe some prison leavers had assumed that the activities on offer via the Community Football Trusts were all centred around playing football, when in fact there were a variety of other sports and skills development on offer such as grounds

maintenance and making repairs to the stadiums. Knowledge of the variety of activities on offer may have made the offer more attractive to those who do not like football.

*I think another variation could be the sport as well, obviously I think you know we do a lot of football really across the board [...] but I know a lot of the Trusts so for us for example we have a rugby league development officer and I spoke to him and said will you come down and do a bit of something like that, just to mix things up and let's face it, not everyone's a football fan*

*I feel like they were just using us to deliver the sport, which is fine but we've got the skills and attributes to do much more. And I feel that we could have exploited that a little bit more*

Football mentors identified some activities and development that they felt would enhance the service's offer such as CV writing and opportunities to develop their relationship with the project's participants and explore their specific needs, however it was felt that extra resources and training would be needed to facilitate these.

*If we had that sit-down session and talked about things like work or anything else you know what they want, what their aspirations are or goals are in life you know and we haven't really like delved into that*

Partner representatives further felt that the offer should be targeted and protected sessions should be available exclusively to referred prison leavers. However, sessions were open to other groups. As a result, some partner representatives were unsure whether the service would be suitable for them to refer ex-offenders to.

*We've seen numbers of participants attending really increase but again something that we've discussed internally is [...] not all those clients necessarily were the clients that we were targeting [...] so we started to get like individuals attending who had not been in the criminal justice system but may have had issues around mental health or substance misuse, which again I think the programme's great and the engagement's great sorry but ultimately that's not what the programme's objectives were for*

Furthermore, partner representatives wanted to refer to a targeted service for those who have been in the criminal justice system. Services that were open to those with other backgrounds were perceived to lack a crucial element of peer support and were thus viewed as "diluted":

*Having more participants who were not criminal justice system referrals - it has 'diluted' the service – has impacted on key component which was the support participants got from each other ... at the beginning we did have sort of between five and ten that were all from the criminal justice system and they were all there and they all shared stories with each other and they all sort of that peer to peer support and it was really working*

## Contextual factors

### **COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting measures to prevent the spread of infection meant that the majority of services had to close down for a substantial period of time in order to comply with national requirements. This meant that the support available from services was limited.

*Most of those venues that you can really hire out have been closed, so although the club and the Trust have been great that our facilities have kind of remained open for one to one stuff anyway or very targeted kind of group work, we have still been limited because obviously we've had other students on site still or when it's been lockdown we've not been able to really do as much*

## **Sustainability**

While funding was available to deliver the United Together project for a finite period of time, partner representatives did not view the intervention as being sustainable in the long term. This was disappointing to those who felt that they had worked effectively with prison leavers.

*We've run out of funding now haven't we, we haven't got funding now and it's a shame because all them relationships are built*

Partner representatives felt that the project as whole had been under-resourced in terms of the money available to pay for full-time football trust staff and their training and that this has impacted on the quality of the project.

*It's been difficult in that the funding they've given us just doesn't go anywhere near to what we've been trying to deliver [...] I think the Trust would say we haven't really had enough resource to do this properly*

*It's always quite difficult to do that when you've got a 0.5 worker on it as well, because ultimately, it's not their full-time job to do that, it's part of it. And I feel unless you have someone you know full-time and commitment spent on that one project, it's quite difficult [...] the more investment into it I feel like the more we can do*

## **Partnership Working**

What is working successfully and why?

### ***Building professional networks***

When individuals working in the partner organisations had been in their roles for some time, good personal relationships had developed that facilitated referrals and timely access to services. However, although important, personal relationships and friendships were not crucial to maintaining trust across organisations to deliver a good quality service. Partner representatives felt that Active Lancashire had a good reputation among other professionals and that this facilitated partnership working in the longer term, as individual staff moved on.

*We've been going for so long now, it's the signposting that we can do, you know the networks that we've built up, them partners that we can work with and the trust that we've got with those people, so just saying here's somebody to get into supported accommodation, once upon a time it would have been a case of oh just fill in the referral form and we'll get back to you, whereas now we can make the phone call and we can get people in places a lot quicker because of that trust that we've built up and that relationship we've got now with partners*

*You do build up that relationship don't you almost to the point where it's a friendship develops really isn't it? However, the trust is already there isn't it, that reputation has already been embedded into the service so I've not got a problem thinking oh they'll move on and nobody will want to phone us 'cos I don't think that, I think because of the I'd say the results that we've already had and the reputation that I think that will happen anyway*

Professional networks could also facilitate signposting to important resources to support the sustainability of services such as identifying and supporting potential applications for funding.

*We went back and talked to the [organisation name] again, and they encouraged us to bid for a [district] wide sort of project which we started, which is the one that's just come to the end in June*

*We've even got now some partners who have been directors of other organisations that we work with, they've moved now into a different post and they now become, they're an advocate now of our project, so actually what's happening now is when funding's coming in and it fits what we are doing, we're actually getting a phone call now and saying look we've got this, can you put me in an expression of interest together or put this proposal together on your budget and we're actually being included, so to get to that stage is a really nice feeling because then you know you've done things right*

Strong professional networks could also ensure that organisations worked together to deliver a joined-up approach that resulted in better support for individual prison leavers. This could involve a more tailored, person-centred approach to deliver a programme of activities based on individual need.

*And because you're working together and if [prison leavers] are actually on licence then it makes it great that you're a stronger partnership aren't you working with that person, providing that better support with them? So that's definitely working in partnership just creates that better wrap around service which is giving that one person a better chance in life you know and to move on and keep on that straight and narrow path*

*Someone from the project met them at the gate – this was very important – don't know how to do things for themselves – having someone to support them is a “massive tick”*

*United Together, they're basically meeting them from when they come out of prison and they're supporting them, not always doing everything with them, because they'll be signposting them [...], but they'll always come back to that one mentor, and they will be with them for as long as they need*

### **Communication facilitates relationship building**

Good communication was seen by all partners as vital to enabling partnership working. The strong relationships between peer mentors and football mentors were felt to be particularly grounded in availability to chat over the phone and willingness to answer questions and the development of regular meetings where there was an opportunity to share good practice and discuss individual cases.

*We're just in contact with each other on a regular sort of basis, like weekly just interaction like I mean for example it just so happened I haven't been to the last two sessions just*

*because of other work commitments but you know I've got in contact with [person's name] so it's just catch up like you know how was the session*

The introduction of the regular meetings and the facilitation of information sharing was felt to have changed the course of delivery for the better. For example, peer mentors would accept referrals with less information around risk as they had developed trust with probation officers around the suitability of individuals to participate in the project's activities. In turn, individuals at the probation service gained trust in peer mentors to deliver an appropriate and effective service. This led to the probation service making more referrals than they had in previous months. Regular meetings also provided an opportunity for information regarding this good practice to be cascaded among the Community Football Trusts.

*We brought them all together and they have a meeting once a month and discuss, you know, what good practice or just have a general chit chat about how it's working in each area and how each other's doing, so that's worked really well, it's sort of brought them all together and been able to share ideas and funnily enough it's also been that where some of the football clubs obviously the mentors have gone back and said oh [organisation name] got a bit of a community hub going on now, they're providing you know A, B, C, so then you get one of the other clubs ... saying that, "oh right then, oh they're doing this are they? Right well we need to look at doing that"*

*So I suppose trying to unpick what is it that makes you not feel like that, I think it's their professionalism, I think they've very open to learning so I think that partnership stuff is really important isn't it, again you can't really put your finger on it sometimes can you but it's about that willingness to learn but also they're confident with what they do, but they're not so confident that they come in and go this is our model, we're doing it, so it's that flexibility*

*What I like about [organisation name] is that they've got that experience of working in the criminal justice system but they also know what they don't know, so you know we had conversations early on about we did some training for them for around working with sex offenders for example*

*And it's about making sure that our partners who are working with us are all happy and taking that feedback and making sure that we adapt the project to fit whatever needs have been cropping up*

*There are a lot of partner organisations out there who aren't great maybe and who talk the talk and don't do it, and you know so you kind of build your little group of people that you can trust, so I think trust in what they've delivered before is key*

*So I think in terms of communications, always been really strong. We do hold it's probably bimonthly steering group meetings where we'll discuss sort of the operation of United Together and what was going well, what wasn't going well*

### ***Partnership is made up of relevant skill mix***

Partner representatives who referred to United Together described partnership working as vital to co-ordinate specific key components of the overall intervention (e.g. peer mentoring; signposting; physical activity; prison pre-release programme). Each organisation was seen as

bringing specialist expertise and support in their own areas. A strong, joined-up approach based on trust between organisations was seen as vital to bring together many elements to implement a complex service successfully.

*With probation we're very structured in our what we'd got on offer, so we had got [organisation name] who were providing accommodation, we've got the [organisation name] providing support for women, and you know that was all very structured. [Organisation name] really filled the gaps for me on a personal level in relation to parts of offending behaviour that we would look at around things like lifestyle and associates, kind of how you're spending your time, community integration, so thinking about the desistance model and how that's very much linked to you know positive influences, so all of that in mind*

Partner representatives reported that the skill mix within the partnership enabled better safeguarding and more opportunities for prison leavers with complex needs to access services. Partner organisations were viewed as having specific, relevant knowledge relating to the criminal justice system including lived experience, underlined by the same overarching aim that focused on welfare and rehabilitation.

*I think so for a lot of people we work with, they're very excluded from a lot of normal day to day stuff and I think that's partly because it's quite hard to integrate somebody, say with a sexual offence, ... you've got to really be careful where you signpost people to 'cos there could be all sorts of safeguarding issues that emerge from that ... you could say to somebody, "you know we've identified an adult only gym", but then you might find that gym is in a complex where there's children going or there's schools going or whatever so all that work takes a lot of time and I think as an organisation we've you know because of the workloads and the focus it's very much on making sure that person doesn't reoffend and having the time to make those wider links with other partners who aren't terrified of the idea of it [...] obviously it can't be just any organisation and what I like about [organisation name] is that they've got that experience of working in the criminal justice system*

Partner representatives viewed Community Football Trust involvement in the partnership as having a unique role around the provision of attractive resources, in addition to their service provision. This included national facilities that could host partnership events that were associated with the appeal and prestige of football clubs. In addition to the involvement of football clubs proving attractive to prison leavers, some also felt that partnership staff from the criminal justice sector found them equally impressive.

*A lot of the staff members of [organisation name] end up being, they're local so they're [football club name] supporters [...] that sort of made that relationship far better and far easier*

*The probation were very keen on the Football Trusts, they felt that the name you know and that whole idea would really resonate well with people coming out of prison and they'd like to be linked with the Football Trust*

## Learning and developing

### *Planning and information sharing*

Good sharing of information between partner organisations early on in the project was viewed as vital to promote coherence and clarity around the individual offers from each service and what the expectations were regarding activities and outcomes for prison leavers. This was important for ensuring the services contained relevant content and that they addressed outcomes that were meaningful to prison leavers and referring organisations.

*Probation officers being unaware of what our service is about, you know 'cos I've had referrals off probation officers asking me to do x, y, z with a client but not actually realising what our remit is*

*We could really do with a workshop somewhere along the line just management going into probation offices and actually explaining what our service does*

Partner representatives felt that it would have been useful to formalise a joint understanding between partner organisations about the project before commencing activity. This should include information and parameters around operational aspects of the partnership, including processes, roles and content of services. They also felt that this should also include regulatory and safeguarding elements, including information around the nature of the client group, information to include in referrals, limits on information sharing and defined roles of each partner organisation.

*Yeah I think with the [organisation name] the hard thing was the lack of clarity from them really at the beginning about what, you know we were a bit new to it and they were kind of telling us what they needed but they didn't have many ideas of what they wanted it to look like or what they wanted to measure, so I think that was the difficulty*

*I would have liked to have been involved more [...] and I feel like that could have been more on that strategic angle of the meetings that I keep discussing, that the monitoring and evaluation and where we was up to in terms of you know client journeys, it was sort of we engage on a Friday afternoon it was and then we come away and we didn't really know anything else about what was happening in the background*

The lack of early planning and consideration around referral information that could inform risk assessment for those delivering services was seen as leading to delays in access or to prison leavers being excluded altogether.

*They bounced them back, they bounced loads of referrals back and I had to be very careful who I sent, it made my job a lot harder 'cos I had to find other places for them to go, I had to be very careful, I had to mentor them a lot more, I had to make sure they were ready to go*

*They hadn't really worked with these kind of people at all, and actually there were some real barriers started to go up, you know they were really quite risk averse and you know quite worried about it all*

*... 'big breakdown' early on there was a lot of safeguarding issues to come in and some of the clubs just couldn't you know, it's like oh my gosh you know we've got a reputation, we've got this, 'cos you know some of our guys are sex-offenders [...] so it's not just*

*we're picking out people who've done minor assaults, you know they are an absolutely variety of people that are coming in*

Similarly, lack of prior consideration around regulatory issues, such as those associated with prison access could hamper service delivery, particularly around accessibility for peer mentors with previous criminal records.

*I think some of the challenges particularly for aside is so for example like [person's name] couldn't come with us into the prison because of his previous records which I feel is like really disappointing because if we were going to do this line of work, not everyone can be squeaky clean, so that's something that, [...] I think that's something in terms of the sort of the broader picture that they need to look at*

### Implementing a long-term shared approach

Partner representatives felt that it was important that individual organisations were committed to working together in the long-term. A particular barrier to this could be competition between organisations for a finite supply of funding. They felt that, without building on the joined-up approach developed in the short-term involving different organisations with a relevant skill mix coming together, the delivery and content of services would ultimately be inferior.

*I'm saying to them we need to apply for the PCC [Police and Crime Commissioner], three of them went and applied on their own before we realised, can you just retract that 'cos we're trying to all go in together*

## Conclusion

This rapid evaluation aimed to address the following research questions;

- 1) How has the United Together project been implemented across Lancashire and how have partners worked together in facilitating the delivery of the project?
- 2) What are the key elements that have made the project successful, including what barriers and facilitators are there to the partnership working and what was the value of the partnership?
- 3) Is the project sustainable and easily replicated in other areas?

All partner representatives felt that the partnership was made up of the right organisations with the relevant skill mix for delivering effective services to ex-offenders, and that individuals from these organisations respected each other as experts in their own field. Peer mentor's lived experience and their ability to relate to and engage with ex-offenders was a vital element of the project. The involvement of the Community Football Trusts provided appeal and credibility to the service as a whole ("the pull of the badge") and the unique facilities that formed part of their offer were valued.

Approaching the rehabilitation of ex-offenders through a combination of peer mentorship and physical activity, as advocated by the Ministry of Justice (2018) and Fletcher and Batty (2012) is supported by the findings of this research. In addition to the positive influence of peer mentors in

engaging ex-offenders, physical activity was viewed as mechanism of change for ex-offenders to spend their free time, which could act as a replacement for criminal activity and the skills and support that can be accessed through United Together may support improved health and wellbeing outcomes, and reduce health inequalities.

Based on the perspectives of partner representatives who took part in this research, things that could continue to support the success of the project include;

- Utilising the mix of expertise, knowledge and experience of individuals across the partner organisations, to engage with and offer support to ex-offenders
- Adopting a person-centred approach through developing a tailored package of support for ex-offenders referred in the project, and building trust and relationships with ex-offenders
- Ensuring that the location of services are accessible (e.g., by public transport)
- Continued opportunities to develop professional networks across partner organisations, to enable information sharing and suitable signposting for ex-offenders
- Good and regular communication between partner organisations, particularly in the form of regular meetings to share good practice and discuss individual cases, and ad-hoc telephone calls to respond to issues as they arise
- Minimising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on service provision, and offering continued access to support for ex-offenders.

Based on the perspectives of partner representatives who took part in this research, things identified that could be put into place to improve the success of the project included;

- Improved clarity of the Community Football Trusts' offer, including the content of the services (e.g., in addition to football activities) and whether services were offered exclusively to the ex-offenders referred via partner organisations
- Developing a consensus amongst partner organisations around safeguarding and risk assessment of delivering services for some ex-offenders
- Having a joint understanding and sufficient planning between partner organisations around service delivery and partnership working before the start of the project, which has clear guidance on processes such as information sharing, roles, and referral procedures, and has been developed with representatives from all partner organisations
- Adequate funding and resources (e.g., for staff time and training) that would support the sustainability of the project in the longer-term
- Partner organisations being committed to working together in the longer-term, for example, coordinating funding applications to ensure that they are not competing for access to the same funding streams.

Looking ahead, United Together is now working closely with the North West Regional Probation Service. This is a new combined Probation Service which unified the Community Rehabilitation Companies with the National Probation Service in June 2021. Indeed, the United Together project was highlighted as a "stand out" example of locally commissioned services in the North West Probation Reducing Re-Offending Plan.

Due to funding constraints within the new probation service, it will only be possible to secure limited funding for a 12-month period but it will allow the partnership to continue working together and respond to the findings of this report.

## Summary

Partner representatives reported that the work United Together has undertaken to support ex-offenders has been largely successful. The delivery model implemented (peer mentorship combined with physical activity, supported by partnership working and signposting) is promising, and this rapid evaluation has identified key barriers and facilitators that could be used to improve future implementation of the United Together project.

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