Co-production and digitally-enabled interventions in justice settings

Jason Morris is a Senior Policy Manager working in Service Design in Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service Probation Reform Programme. Zack Haider is the Community Development Director at Intuitive Thinking Skills

Technology has been used to good effect for many years within educational settings and the personal development arena more broadly. Digital media, apps and virtual learning environments are now standard tools for many of us when developing new knowledge and skills. By comparison, the criminal justice sector has lagged behind in its use of technology to support people who choose to work towards positive life goals. Notwithstanding, the focus of government digital services on 'user needs, not government needs'[1] provides an important direction for efforts to digitally-enable the desistance agenda. This article brings together two unique yet converging perspectives on how we can place service users at the heart of technology designed to promote desistance.

Although the authors of this article come from very different backgrounds, both have led initiatives to design and support the delivery of interventions. One common observation made on these separate paths has been the appetite for innovation amongst lived experience leaders, academics, interventions facilitators, managers and service users. This has inspired and encouraged both authors to explore opportunities to co-produce technological adjuncts to make interventions more responsive to the needs of participants. Recently, these perspectives have been combined in a project to share the stories and voices of experts-by-experience by co-producing digital content for an intervention for people with drink or drug driving offences. This collaboration has affirmed the authors' belief in the importance of co-production and user-led design in creating responsive interventions. In this article, we aim to articulate how co-production can lead to more inclusive, culturally competent services by blending theory with lived experience. We also discuss some potential future directions for the development of digitally-enabled interventions made with and for people with lived experience of justice settings.

This article provides an exposition of the views of the authors in an emerging area of policy and practice. These views are not intended to pre-empt or prohibit any future changes to the way that digital strategies are used within interventions in HMPPS.

Lived experiences within justice settings

The value of 'subjective perceptions' of lived experience in the criminal justice system is evident in the growing number of peer-led organisations and networks delivering services to people in prisons and on probation in England and Wales.[2] Within HMPPS, there is increasing recognition of the benefits of incorporating lived experience into the design and delivery of services. Through forums such as the HMPPS Lived Experience Engagement Network, practitioners and policy leads can now forge collaborative partnerships with lived experience leaders and peer-led organisations.

One such organisation is Intuitive Thinking Skills, which was established in 2004 by the second author and his co-Director (Peter Bentley). They were motivated by their own personal experiences of the healthcare, social care, and criminal justice sectors. They sought to offer a peer-led 'recovery orientated' alternative to medicalised and spiritual/faith-based services that were prevalent at that time. Recovery orientated practice requires a commitment to creating preconditions for recovery (as defined by the service user) by enhancing hope, building working relationships and developing 'citizenship skills' (e.g., being active, empowered, self-determining and self-managing in one's own life).[3] Recovery oriented practice inspired the second author to design and deliver a range of educational and skills-based services. This has

1. Bracken, M. (2015). Mapping New Ideas for the Digital Justice System. Available at: https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2015/08/18/mapping-new-ideas-for-the-digital-justice-system-2/ (Accessed 02/04/22).
2. Maruna, S. & LeBel, T. (2003). Welcome Home? Examining the "Reentry Court" Concept from a Strengths-based Perspective. *Western Criminology Review, 4(2),* 91-107.
3. Le Boutillier C., Leamy M., Bird, V., et al (2011). What does recovery mean in practice? A qualitative analysis of international recovery-oriented practice guidance. *Psychiatric Services, 62,* 1470–6.

been aided by an agile service development approach that attunes service design to the challenges faced by communities. This model embeds lived experience at every level of the business. Ex-service users are recruited as mentors, trainers and 'impact and quality assurance officers' who deliver peer review sessions to capture, read, listen to, collate and most importantly act on the insights, feedback and suggestions of current service users.

The first author's career path reflects 21 years working within HMPPS in various roles developing and delivering psychologically informed interventions that promote desistance. The last five years of this have involved the development of 'complementary digital media'[4] which aims to incorporate lived experience into the design of interventions. These clips are used to get conversations started during intervention sessions by helping facilitators deliver key information about rehabilitative skills and ideas.[5] These animated audio-visual explainer clips are embedded within HMPPS interventions for men and women with criminogenic needs relating to emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, attitudes, etc. The clips are short (usually no more than 4 minutes) and often depict a relatable character using a specific skill to successfully manage a challenging situation that could lead to offending. Through co-production, complementary digital media also uses the voices and stories of 'experts-by-experience' to show intervention participants how therapeutic ideas and skills might work for them in practice.

Such is the interest in incorporating lived experience within the design of interventions, stakeholders have shown an appetite for articles like this one that aim to reflect on and share learning relating to co-production methods and the impacts of this kind of work. Many co-production approaches exist along Arnstein's ladder of citizen power from tokenistic rituals to services developed entirely with and for their service users.[6] Described below are examples of co-production on different rungs of this ladder that signal the potential of digital co-production techniques to promote desistance.

Digital interventions within justice settings

The therapeutic skills of intervention facilitators are critical to ensuring that evidence-informed interventions are responsive to the needs of participants. Notwithstanding, digital co-production can help developers to make responsive intervention content that is more reflective of the day-to-day lives and needs of participants.[7] With a few notable exceptions (such as the Breaking Free Online substance misuse initiative),[8] digital approaches have been conspicuous by their absence from most interventions in justice settings.

In recent years, Intuitive Thinking Skills has co-produced digital tools and approaches that augment the delivery of their community services. Their recovery orientated interventions are complemented by interactive eLearning content that sits within a cloud-based, integrated learning management system. Service users can access this platform either as a standalone or as part of a blended service (which can include remotely delivered or in-person sessions). These innovations have been further supported by investments in staff skills, infrastructure, and security standards such as ISO, GDPR and Cyber Essentials Plus.

Accelerated by the adversities of the Covid-19 pandemic, mainstream HMPPS interventions have also adapted by incorporating complementary digital media and other technologies (including video conferencing software, smartphones, and media platforms like YouTube) to enable remote access delivery of intervention sessions. Within this context, the benefits of co-produced complementary digital media have come to the fore in terms of bringing engaging lived experience perspectives into intervention sessions, whether delivered remotely or in-person.

> Digital co-production can help developers to make responsive intervention content that is more reflective of the day-to-day lives and needs of participants.

4. Morris, J. & Graham, H. (2019) 'Using technology and digitally enabled approaches to support desistance' (chapter 16) in P. Ugwudike, H. Graham, F. McNeill, F. Taxman & C. Trotter (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Rehabilitative Work in Criminal Justice.* London: Routledge.
5. Morris, J., Raducu, A. A., Fuller, M., et al. (2021). Towards a desistance-focused approach to probation supervision for people who have committed Intimate Partner Violence: A digital toolkit pilot study, Probation Journal, 68(2), 261–281.
6. Arnstein, S. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35(4),* 216–224.
7. Morris, J. & Knight, V. (2018). Co-producing digitally-enabled courses that promote desistance in prison and probation setting. Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice, 4(4), 269–279.
8. Elison, S., Weston, S., Dugdale, S., Ward, J. and Davies, G. (2016). A qualitative exploration of UK prisoners' experiences of substance misuse and mental health difficulties, and the Breaking Free Health and Justice interventions. *Journal of Drug Issues, 46*(3), 198–215.

Co-production in practice: Examples of complementary digital media projects

Whilst peer-led organisations are (by definition) built on the lived experiences of their founders and service users, HMPPS provides a distinctly different context in which to do co-production. Service User Reference Groups (SURGs) offer an effective method for service designers in large organisations to tune into the needs of service users. This process involves recruiting service users from target audiences to work collaboratively with practitioners to co-produce specific outputs. The first author has used the SURG approach on multiple occasions to co-produce complementary digital media. This requires discussions and workshops where co-creators with relevant lived experiences develop vignettes, write scripts, record voiceovers, and advise on the design of content. To illustrate some of the processes and benefits involved in co-producing complementary digital media, four exemplar projects are described below.

Firstly, to address heterosexism within domestic abuse interventions,[9] the SURG approach was used to develop an evidence-informed intervention for men in same sex relationships (as well as a variant for heterosexual men). SURG members were interviewed after their involvement and spoke of their pride in representing their target audiences. The SURG process can surface a range of issues of importance to people experiencing minority stressors and their contributions can often signal resilience in the face of discrimination and inequality. Capturing these dynamics within co-produced intervention content, resonates with HMPPS's aim to develop inclusive services.

Whilst co-production can be a vehicle for inclusivity and cultural competence, effective interventions are also characterised by underpinning theories and models of change. To preserve the integrity of interventions, co-production activities will often blend the input of experts-by-experience with contributions from practitioners and academics. In a second exemplar, digital co-production was used to both preserve and advance previous innovations from one of the recently renationalised Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs). The Probation Reform Programme (PRP) Service Design Team enabled an ex-CRC probation officer (Don Nesbit) to build upon co-production work completed at Northumbria CRC in partnership with Professor Fergus McNeill. The original project in 2015 used a SURG approach to develop a clinical application of a Model of Desistance[10] for use within intervention sessions. In 2021, to support the development of a national suite of Structured Interventions,[11] this model was adapted (see Figure 1) and incorporated into a piece of complementary digital media co-produced with Gethin Jones (then employed by PRP as a Lived Experience Consultant). Feedback from stakeholders (including the authors of the model itself) highlighted that the model of desistance being accurately represented and that Gethin's own lived experiences added a unique element that brought the model to life.

Figure 1. A Model for Desistance (Adapted from Bottoms and Shapland, 2011)

---
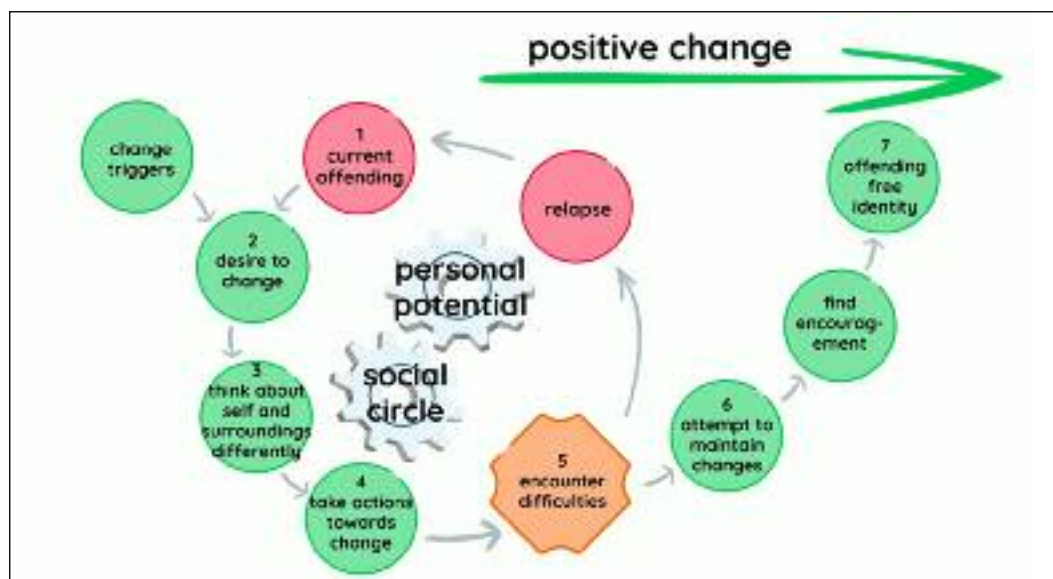
9.   Morris, J. & Baverstock, L. (2021) Gibbs, C., Jonah, L., Bloomfield, S., Weatherstone, P. & Ireland, J. L. (2019). Developing content to promote desistance in men who have committed intimate partner violence in same-sex relationships. *European Journal of Probation, 11* (2) 96-113.
10. Bottoms, A. E., & Shapland, J. M. (2011). Steps towards Desistance among Male Young Adult Recidivists. In S. Farrall, M. Hough, S. Maruna & R. Sparks (Eds.) *Escape Routes: Contemporary Perspectives on Life after Punishment.* Routledge.
11. Delivering Quality Interventions in Probation: The Rehabilitation Activity Requirement (RAR) - HMPPS Insights

---

A third co-production exemplar also highlighted how lived experiences can be blended with theoretically robust therapeutic approaches.[12] This paper described how a visual language (influenced by Polyvagal Theory)[13] was developed to help communicate the internal states of characters within co-produced complementary digital media. Within these clips a 'fight/flight' visual signalled a feeling of threat; a 'shutdown' visual corresponded to exposure to prolonged stressors; and a 'safe/social' visual highlighted a positive emotional consequence for characters when they successfully overcame challenges (see Figure 2). This strategy aimed to give an emotional dimension to complementary digital media by providing subtle visual cues to reinforce emotional insight and prompt further exploration of this during therapeutic discussions within intervention sessions.

Figure 2. Polyvagal states: 'safe/social', 'fight/flight', 'shutdown'
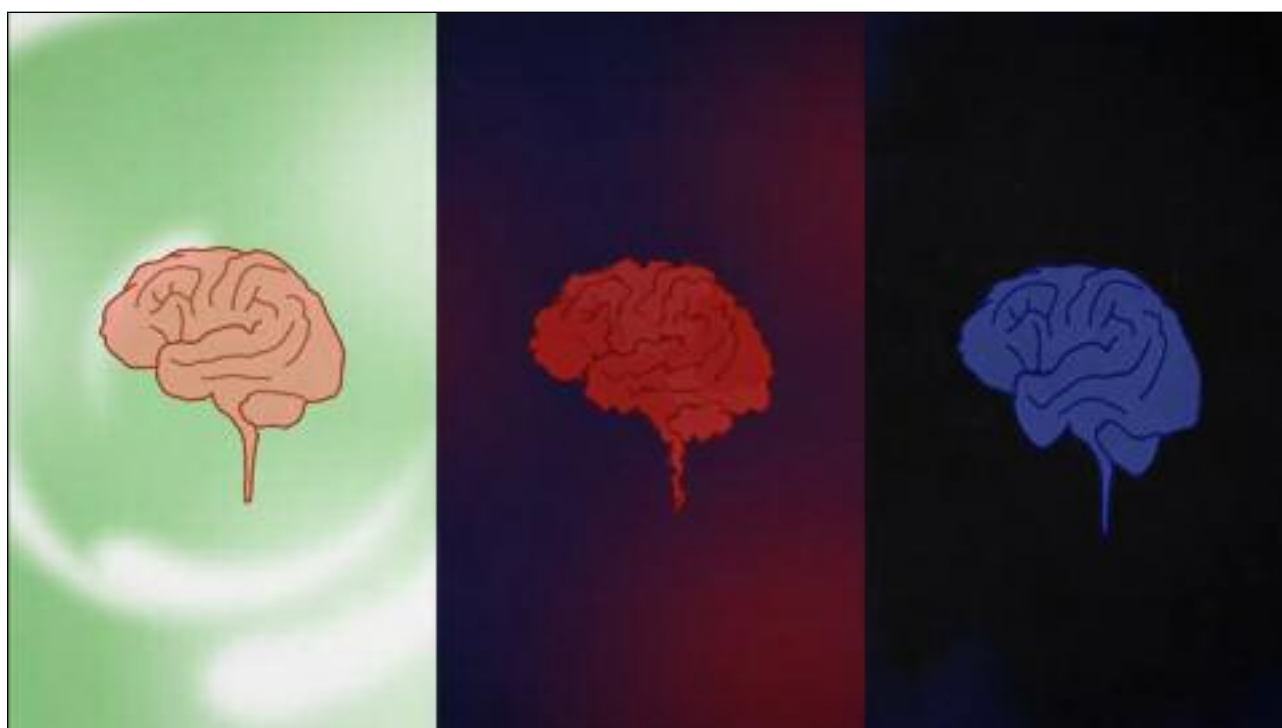
Anecdotal evidence collected from training events has revealed positive reactions to this new content from Probation Service staff. Further feedback (including that from participants) will be obtained to during a Structured Intervention implementation review approved by the HMPPS National Research Committee.

In this article's fourth (and final) exemplar, the authors combined their skills and expertise. In a commission brokered by the HMPPS Lived Experience Engagement Network, the second author has fulfilled a creative brief developed by a working group representing interventions teams in several Probation Service regions. The project involved:

❏ developing a 'look and feel' that incorporated the polyvagal-informed visual language described above.
❏ recruiting volunteers with relevant lived experiences to share their skills, stories and voices.
❏ implementing tools such as mood boards, 'Storyline 360', Adobe software and a newly acquired sound booth.
❏ responding to feedback on character micro-movements, background music, the reinforcement of psychological principles and the inclusion of additional voices of lived experience.

The success of the project depended on several factors, including:

❏ a tight turnaround from start to finish.
❏ meeting basic requirements against a limited budget.
❏ meeting the literacy needs of participants.
❏ ensuring simple, effective, attractive, and user-friendly end-products.

To quality assure the end-products, a roundtable of practitioners and experts-by-experience was convened, which provided feedback from a range of perspectives.

12. Ferguson, R. (2021). Transforming criminal justice through co-production. *Forensic Update,* 139, 12-15.
13. Porges, S.W. (2011). The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation (Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology). WW Norton & Company.

Both authors have learnt several lessons from this process. An analysis of staff and participant reactions to this content will be completed in future research.

Managing co-production and impact

Whilst the worlds of the authors are distinct, there are many similarities in their perspectives of co-production. First and foremost, the potential emotional labour required to do co-production should never be underestimated. Co-production can bring up a mixture of thoughts and emotions for co-creators and for staff. The need to create a safe environment is paramount due to the potential of this work to evoke memories of traumatic events (e.g., experiences of victimisation and discrimination). Safety can be created by explicitly addressing power imbalances through open discussion and genuinely inviting co-creators to share their concerns, interests, strengths, hopes, preferences, and goals.

Following best practice principles is also essential to create safety, maximise positive outcomes and minimise the potential for unintended harms. Frameworks like the HMPPS National Service User Involvement Standards of Excellence can be supplemented with other frameworks like the 4Pi user Involvement Standards (developed by the National Survivor User Network; NSUN).[14] 4Pi helps developers to think about user involvement in terms of principles, purpose, presence, process, and impact. The 4Pi framework raises many questions about how to deliver co-production projects responsibly:

❏ How can we enable equality of opportunity in the recruitment of people who adequately reflect the target audience?
❏ What information can be provided to participants to ensure they are able to give full and informed consent?
❏ What meeting times, locations, venues, tasks and activities will be inclusive for all contributors?
❏ What do co-creators want to achieve from their involvement and what can be done to help them achieve this?

> First and foremost, the potential emotional labour required to do co-production should never be underestimated. Co-production can bring up a mixture of thoughts and emotions for co-creators and for staff.

❏ How can the authenticity of co-creator contributions be preserved whilst maintaining the integrity of the project's requirements?
❏ What supports are in place for co-creators after sessions and after the project has ended?

As well as supporting the responsible management of co-production projects, the emphasis of 4Pi on evaluating 'impact' (both positive and negative) ensures that important lessons are learnt from co-production projects.

People volunteer to get involved in co-production activities for many different reasons and the impacts of their involvement on them and others are equally diverse. It is important to understand what co-creators want out of their involvement and to do what is reasonably possible to help them achieve this. Post-involvement surveys and follow-up conversations provide important insights into their experiences. Positive impacts may include refreshing and developing knowledge, skills and ideas that supported their own desistance. In some cases, involvement may support their professional development by providing skills and experiences of processes involved in the development and delivery of services in justice settings. People can derive a sense of belonging from involvement too by being part of something bigger than themselves that also offers an additional layer of support. Helping others, feeling valued and having a sense of purpose are also common benefits that co-creators report:

> *'if I can give my guidance and knowledge to someone and make someone else's life better, there's nothing better than that is there?' (pp. 17).*[15]

Although resource intensive, formal research studies delivered in partnership with academic institutions provide credible independent appraisals of the impact of the outputs of co-production on services. For example, research that systematically sampled the reflections of participants and practitioners has

14.   4Pi Involvement Standards - NSUN website
15.   Morris, J. (2021). Enabling effective probation practice using complementary digital media, *Forensic Update, 139,* 16-21.

suggested that co-produced complementary digital media was a beneficial part of a practitioner toolkit used to help people with domestic abuse offences develop new relationship skills.[16] As noted above further research is planned to assess the impact of the co-production exemplars described above.

Co-production can also have a profound impact on service designers and has potentially transformative potential for services and the broader social system.[17] Working in partnership helps providers to gain a more authentic appreciation for service user perspectives, their strengths and how they overcome challenges. The successes of co-creators, and the steps they have taken to attain their goals, are inspirational. This inspiration is the day-to-day: the conscious efforts they make, the positive things they do and the people who help them keep moving forwards. Without belief in people's potential to move forward, everything we do would be tokenistic and ultimately unsuccessful.

Technology for good: Co-production and whole system intervention design

Believing in the transformative potential of lived experience in justice settings is not enough. Interventions also need to adhere to theoretically robust behaviour change models and wider strategic aims. The exemplars in this article provide evidence that the parameters of 'What Works' do not preclude the ethical use of digital techniques to co-produce complementary digital media that better reflects the needs of service users. These digital building blocks can be curated within integrated learning management systems accessed via in-cell computers in prisons and on smart devices in the community. Usage data and insights into user journeys can drive future iterations of these systems to create more joined-up experiences for intervention participants across the whole system. Ensuring quality user experiences of these platforms will be key to the extent to which they can support the wider rehabilitative environment (i.e., outside the group room). Ready access to consistent, culturally competent, desistance-focused messaging across prison and probation settings has the potential to empower participants to take ownership of their desistance journeys and self-direct their own learning at times convenient for them. Importantly, creating access to needs-led cohort-specific sets of content selected from a broader framework also has the potential to assist (often over-stretched) sentence management staff to support people in prisons and on probation to consolidate their learning from previous rehabilitative activities. Rather than 'starting from scratch' at each transition in the system, integrated complementary digital approaches to traditional probation practice can create more teachable moments to help people build working alliances and keep moving forward wherever they are in their sentence.

---

16.   Morris, et al. (2021).
17.   Ferguson, R. (2021).