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The transition from prison to the community of people convicted of sexual offences: Policy and practice recommendations.

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Introduction

The number of people in prison in England and Wales with a current or previous conviction for a sexual offence has risen significantly in recent years, in part because of a growth in the number of convictions for historical offences over this period, but also as a result of growing recognition and understanding of the harm that sexual offending causes. Changes in legislation² and developments in professional practice have taken place as a response to these legitimate concerns. However, it is vital that research explores the best methods of both reducing reoffending and supporting people either to become, or return to being, positive citizens who are accepted by their communities.

This article is a summary of the recommendations for policy and practice following a research study as part of a PhD in socio-legal studies at the University of Nottingham. The thesis explores and advances the established literature on desistance, risk assessment, and risk management, critically analyses the expectations and experiences of people convicted of sexual offences in the transition from prison to the community, and examines data from those responsible for their supervision.

The research provides an insight from the perspectives of the people involved in this challenging period, and there were findings in six key areas: the impact of imprisonment on a person but also the benefits of the prison as a community; the importance and role of family support in reducing isolation; the positive impact of employment or purposeful activity on well-being; the stigma and challenges of life in the community; the importance of not simply the provision of accommodation, but the opportunity to establish a home; and the importance of hope and planning for

the future. The work has resulted in several recommendations for improvements in policy and practice with a view to both to reducing reoffending and improving the well-being of the individuals concerned.

Background

As the governor of the institution where this research was focused (HMP Whatton), I had spoken to many prisoners prior to their release. Many expressed their anxieties and uncertainties about the transition from prison to the community. Some said that they were not in contact with family, as they had either committed offences within their family or had been disowned by them as a result of their offences. Some had been in prison for such a long period that their families had died. Often, people were worried about the feelings of isolation and loneliness that they might encounter and how they would cope with having no friends outside of the prison environment. Many were unsure how the notification requirements of the 2003 Sexual Offences Act and the restrictions regarding whom they could associate with upon release would impact upon them. Some people had uncertainties about where they would live, as their licence conditions prevented them from returning to their home area and their Offender Manager had been unable to find any alternative accommodation for them.

These conversations, along with the considerable media and political interest in this group of people, prompted me to consider research into this important area. I wanted to find out to what extent people were prepared for their return to the community, with, it seemed, these significant challenges for their successful reintegration. Knowledge of the actual experiences of this group of people from their perspective is scarce.

1. I am grateful for the willingness of participants to give their time and for their frankness at a very difficult time in their lives. HMPPS generously funded this doctoral work, and the School of Law at the University of Nottingham provided an academic base for this study.
2. *Criminal Justice Act 1991; Sexual Offenders Act 1997; Crime and Disorder Act 1998; Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2000; Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000; Sexual Offences Act 2003; Criminal Justice Act 2003; Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.* Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/>

The research addresses this significant gap in knowledge and gives a voice to a group of people who are arguably the most stigmatised and feared in our society.

Throughout this work, the subjects of study are referred to as 'people convicted of sexual offences' rather than 'sex offenders'. Although this phrase may seem cumbersome, it is important to be positive and forward looking. The research is centred on the whole person and their potential for change, not simply on defining people by their previous behaviour or by what we do not want them to be.³

There has been a significant amount of research on the impact of a period of imprisonment on an individual⁴ and also a substantial focus on factors influencing desistance from crime. More recently, there have been more limited studies exploring factors specifically influencing desistance from sexual offending.⁵ There is a significant body of knowledge on risk prediction and risk management in sexual offending.⁶ However, there has been little research exploring the experiences of people leaving prison and returning to the community with a sexual conviction and how their experiences could influence the knowledge base, policy, and practice in the areas of desistance, risk prediction, and risk management.

For this study, a series of interviews were conducted with eight self-selecting male prisoners to examine their expectations and plans prior to release. The same individuals were then re-interviewed approximately three months after their return to the community to consider how their actual experiences differed from those they had imagined. They were asked to contact the researcher by letter or by telephone at the prison to confirm that they still wished

to participate and that they were available at the time and date offered. This offered the participants another opportunity to opt out, if they chose to do so. All the participants who were interviewed in the prison agreed to, and arranged, follow-up meetings for the second interview. The management and supervision of these individuals was also explored through interviews with their respective Offender Managers.

A total of 24 interviews were conducted, made up of 16 interviews with prisoners pre- and post-release and eight interviews with Offender Managers. This was a qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews.⁷ Thematic analysis was chosen as the preferred analysis approach, in part because it can 'be used to address most types of qualitative research, ranging from

questions about individual lived experience through to those about social construction and meaning'.⁸ The following primary research questions were considered. 1) What are the expectations of people leaving prison with a conviction for a sexual offence? 2) How do these compare with the reality of life in the community? 3) How can this group of people be best assisted not to reoffend? 4) What is the impact of licence conditions and statutory restrictions on their resettlement plans and goals? 5) What support is provided to

people leaving prison? 6) Do ex-prisoners think that their transition could have been done differently and more usefully?

For both the ex-prisoners and the Offender Managers, the focus of these questions was to explore the actual lived experience of the transition from prison to the community of people convicted of sexual offences and how the law and established practice affects their well-being and therefore their successful resettlement.

More recently, there have been more limited studies exploring factors specifically influencing desistance from sexual offending.

3. Willis, G. M. (2015) 'Desistance from sexual offending: Current knowledge and future direction for research and practice'. Research symposium, March 2015. Belfast: Queens University Belfast.
4. Goffman, E. (1961) *Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Anchor Books; Jewkes, Y. (2013) *Captive Audience*. London: Willan; Bosworth, M. (2012) 'Subjectivity and identity in detention: Punishment and society in a global age', *Theoretical Criminology*, 16(2), pp.123-140.
5. Farmer, M., McAlinden, A.-M., and Maruna, S. (2015) 'Understanding desistance from sexual offending: A thematic review of research findings', *Probation Journal*, 62(4), pp.320-335.
6. Hanson, R. K. and Bussière, M. T. (1998) 'Predicting relapse: A meta-analysis of sexual offender recidivism studies', *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66(2), pp.348-362; Laws, D. R. and Osborn, C. A. (1983) 'How to Build and Operate a Behavioural Laboratory to Evaluate and Treat Sexual Deviance' in Greer, J. G. and Stuart, I. R. (eds.), *The Sexual Aggressor: Current Perspectives On Treatment*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, pp.293-335; Beech, A. R., Fisher, D. D., and Thornton, D. (2003) 'Risk assessment of sex offenders', *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 34(4), pp.339-352.
7. Barriball, K. L. and While, A. (1994) 'Collecting data using a semi-structured interview: A discussion paper', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 19(2), pp.328-335.
8. Braun, V., Clarke, V., and Terry, G. (2014) 'Thematic Analysis' in Rohleder, P. and Lyons, A. C. (eds.), *Qualitative Research in Clinical and Health Psychology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp.95-113.

Implications for policy and practice

The key findings of the research considered the implications for both policymakers and practitioners in terms of deciding how best to effectively manage and support a person with sexual convictions leaving prison. Whilst it is important to take into account the need to manage an individual's risk to the public, it is also crucial to provide them with appropriate support and opportunities to live a meaningful life, which will in turn aid both desistance and the risk-management process.

Perspectives on prison life

Inadequate planning and preparation of the person who was due to be released, and the implications of this for a successful transition to the community, were consistent features of the experiences of the research participants. Participants spoke of plans being last minute and often felt that they had little time to plan or consider how they would prepare for and manage this transition. Questions were also raised about the implications of their licence restrictions and the impact of the notification requirements. The opportunity to examine this in more detail is something that both policymakers and practitioners should consider. An earlier introduction to these issues in release planning would be welcome, as a number of participants in this study highlighted.

Prisons releasing people convicted of sexual offences could provide more comprehensive and interactive preparation-for-release programmes, allowing people to consider the key issues in the period prior to their release. These could take place up to six months in advance of the release date and could explore the implications of the notification requirements and when and how to disclose the sexual convictions to prospective partners, friends, and employers. This could potentially reduce the likelihood of non-compliance or even recall. The circumstances of disclosure and the opportunity to practise how this might take place could also assist in developing the confidence of the person prior to their release. This

would be particularly useful in supporting the work undertaken in prisons by programmes teams, but it would also be of practical benefit where prisoners are released from prison without having participated in offending behaviour programmes.

There are often operational and organisational reasons for comparatively short notice being given to a person about their allocation to an Approved Premises for release. The availability of places in Approved Premises is limited and reserved for people with sexual and/or violent convictions who are considered to be a high risk of serious harm to the public.⁹ The growth in the number of people in prison serving sentences for sexual convictions¹⁰ has placed more pressure on the provision of Approved Premises, and the expansion of

appropriate supported housing should be a priority for the Ministry of Justice. As evidenced by the experiences of the participants, people with disabilities and social care needs are particularly disadvantaged by this shortfall, and these issues need to be addressed if the transition from prison to the community is to be successfully managed.

A major restructuring of the Probation Service (Transforming Rehabilitation)¹¹ had taken place at the time of the research interviews, and the shortage of qualified and experienced staff was evident. The Offender Managers interviewed expressed

concern about their workloads and the high numbers of people with sexual convictions they were managing who were considered to be a high risk of reoffending. This had an impact on their ability to plan and prepare for the release of people in a timely fashion. The role of the Offender Manager in successful rehabilitation is considered important in desistance literature. The recruitment and retention of additional Offender Managers, therefore, should be a priority for HMPPS to ensure that adequate release planning takes place.

There are a number of other practical improvements that could be made in policy and practice to aid an individual's transition from prison to the community. Although it may potentially be unpalatable for the general public, the development of IT skills and/or access to the internet for people leaving

The availability of places in Approved Premises is limited and reserved for people with sexual and/or violent convictions who are considered to be a high risk of serious harm to the public.

9. Reeves, C. (2013) '“The others”: Sex offenders' social identities in probation Approved Premises', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 52(4), pp.383-398.

10. Ministry of Justice (2018) Population Bulletin: *Monthly December 2018*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-figures-2018> (Accessed: 04 July 2020).

11. Ministry of Justice (2013) *Transforming Rehabilitation: A Summary of Evidence on Reducing Reoffending*, London: MoJ.

prison with a sexual conviction is vital, and this is a significant problem to be overcome. This is mainly because a number of critical services, such as applications for Universal Credit and appointments at GP surgeries, are almost exclusively online. The development of prisoners' IT skills prior to leaving prison, and extension of the Universal Credit pilot enabling people to apply for benefits prior to their discharge from prison, would help to ensure that people are better able to deal with the challenges of access to benefits and are not left waiting for money for extended periods after leaving prison.

Licence restrictions preventing access to the internet or ownership of a smartphone with the ability to take or download photographs and video or to stream to or from the internet are also potentially problematic. These restrictions may include a person only being permitted to access the internet in a public place, but the reduction in the number of libraries has affected the number of places where even this is possible. In any case, for security reasons, internet access to bank and credit card accounts is not recommended in public places. Whilst in prison, advice and support on how to negotiate these challenges needs to be provided, together with a realistic appraisal of the consequences of non-compliance.

A person's release from prison may also present the first time (or the first time in a considerable period) that they have needed to carry out practical housekeeping skills for themselves; often, they will have been cared for by either parents or partners. Particularly for a person who has served a long prison sentence, the development of knowledge and the opportunity to practise laundry, cooking, and menu-planning skills on a limited income would be a useful service and something that could be provided in prisons prior to a person's release. This clearly has some resource implications, as although prisons provide catering and laundry facilities on an industrial scale, small-scale facilities that are comparable to those in domestic households would enable people who are due to be released to practise their skills and to prepare for their reintegration. As the

majority of people with sexual convictions who are considered to be a high risk of serious harm will be moving to Approved Premises from prison, this is perhaps something that could be continued there to improve confidence and independence.

The opportunity to shop in the community and to develop menu-planning skills on a limited budget is also important if people are to be able to practise budgeting, particularly if an individual is likely to be receiving benefits upon release. This, however, has political implications, as prisons will need to be allowed to release risk-assessed prisoners on temporary licence.

Release on temporary licence (ROTL) from prison is permitted under certain circumstances.¹² However, at the time of the research, this facility is not permitted from closed prisons holding people with sexual convictions (this provision was curtailed following the high-profile case of a person with a serious offence of violence who reoffended whilst on licence in 2014). This change was made despite the evidence that the vast majority of releases from prison on temporary licence are completed successfully and without incident.¹³ It would seem appropriate in these circumstances to prioritise ROTL for people with sexual convictions so that they can be supported in their release planning by both prison staff and community-based Offender Managers.

Again, for long-term prisoners, the impact of a release into the community after serving a long prison sentence is even more pronounced, and therefore the opportunity for this transition to be staged or initially safely supervised by prison staff in these cases is critical. This staged approach would enable people to self-monitor and to manage their own risks in a safe, controlled way. For example, exposure to adults and children outside the controlled, secure environment of a prison will offer people a more detailed insight into how they should manage and plan their safe return to the community.

This gradual, staged process, together with the opportunity to develop practical survival skills, would help mitigate the detrimental impact of

Licence restrictions preventing access to the internet or ownership of a smartphone with the ability to take or download photographs and video or to stream to or from the internet are also potentially problematic.

12. *The Prison Rules* 1999, Rule 9. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukSI/1999/728/article/9> (Accessed 04 July 2020).

13. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (2014) *Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) Failures: A Review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons*. London: HMIP.

institutionalisation and assist in preparing for eventual independence. The provision of opportunities to demonstrate personal initiative, autonomy, and agency has been shown to assist in the desistance process.

Opportunities to reinforce the thinking skills learnt in prison are also important if an individual is to successfully reintegrate and to re-establish their life without reoffending or recall to prison. The knowledge base of the Offender Managers in the community about the offending behaviour programmes in operation in prisons varied in this research. Increasing the knowledge base and skills of Offender Managers is critical so that they are better able to reinforce and remind people of the messages and the skills learnt in the prison-based programmes. This would ensure that the messages given to the person in transition are consistent and best practice about the effectiveness of programmes is enhanced.

As a significant proportion of people with sexual convictions, particularly those serving very long or indeterminate sentences, are not released directly into the community from closed establishments, there are strong arguments that better and sustainable links between open prisons and treatment centres for people with sexual convictions should be developed. This could include: the development of joint training programmes; advice on behaviour and risk management from clinical staff who have worked with people in treatment sites prior to their transfer; virtual tours of open prisons to be shown in treatment sites so that people can familiarise themselves prior to transfer; and developing consistent policies in both treatment sites and open prisons so that people are familiar with the rules and restrictions prior to their move. This will enable the services provided in open prisons to reflect the re-enforcement of the learning from offending behaviour programmes.

Family relationships

The maintenance of family relationships (where possible) is an important factor in the successful transition of a person with a sexual conviction back into

the community, but the well-being of family members who are dealing with the impact on their lives of the conviction on both family dynamics and the local community also need to be considered. As discussed in extant research,¹⁴ family members experience both stigma and grief as a consequence of their relationship with a person with convictions for a sexual offence. This is supported by the findings of this research. For example, some family members of participants found that it was difficult to continue their relationships following the family member's conviction and imprisonment. Both policymakers and individual prisons need to consider how to manage and support family

members through the process. Whilst it may not be possible for family links to be maintained in some circumstances (because of domestic violence or child protection issues, for example), both policy and practice should aim to support this in all other cases. Prisons should ensure that, where possible, family members are welcomed and kept informed and involved in the decision-making processes about their loved one, but also encouraged to ask questions and be given answers about the rationale for decision making, including decisions on licence and child contact restrictions.

If family members are able to visit prisons, then the opportunity should be taken to involve them

in the life of the prison, for example in family days or in case-management meetings, so that they are reassured about the well-being of their loved one and are able to develop an understanding of the reasons for the offence being committed. They then can develop an insight into the risk factors associated with reoffending and can therefore be encouraged to provide guidance and insight when necessary so that they can support the desistance process.

As demonstrated by the experiences of some of the participants, support for family members should continue when someone is released back into the community. This may be in the form of support groups or simply offering advice on both the practical and emotional impacts of dealing with the implications of licence restrictions and notification requirements.

Opportunities to reinforce the thinking skills learnt in prison are also important if an individual is to successfully reintegrate and to re-establish their life without reoffending or recall to prison.

14. Codd, H. (2007) 'Prisoners' families and resettlement: A critical analysis', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 46(3), pp.255-263; Souza, K. A., Lösel, F., Markson, L., and Lanskey, C. (2013) 'Pre release expectations and post release experiences of prisoners and their (ex)partners', *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 20(2), pp.306-323; Naser, R. L. and Visher, C. A. (2006) 'Family members' experiences with incarceration and reentry', *Western Criminology Review*, 7(2), pp.20-31.

Where no family support is available, the provision of alternative support structures is important to try and replicate the advantages of family support and attempt to reduce social isolation. Mentoring programmes or Circles of Support and Accountability¹⁵ projects can be a useful addition to the support network of a person with a sexual conviction re-establishing themselves into the community. Church and community groups can also help to fill this gap by providing alternative sources of social capital. However, the person leaving prison needs to be given realistic and practical guidance on the safeguarding policies of those institutions and how to ensure that the understandable public protection restrictions can be safely managed.

Whilst the responsibility for being part of the community outside of prison rests with the individual, there are also wider implications of this ambition for policy and practice. Community groups themselves should be encouraged to see people convicted of sexual offences as individuals and not a homogeneous group. Risk assessments and risk management should be proportionate to the risk the person actually poses rather than a range of blanket and indiscriminate restrictions. Offender Managers must also encourage appropriate involvement in community groups, and policymakers should encourage informed and individualised risk management rather than a blanket policy of risk avoidance so that the benefits of the community supporting desistance can be realised.

Employment and purposeful activities

The value of work and the impact of unemployment on a person's well-being is well documented.¹⁶ The personal experiences of the people interviewed as part of this research revealed challenges in finding suitable employment or voluntary activities. In particular, these included Offender Manager concerns about risk of contact with the public, employer

reluctance to employ people with sexual convictions, and community groups concerned about reputational risks or safeguarding issues. Given that work is also an important feature of the desistance process, it is crucial that this particular issue is tackled. Whilst it is important that individuals are offered assistance with gaining employment, such as support with CV writing or interview skills, it is also important to educate, engage with, and support employers to employ people with sexual convictions. Again, this means providing employers with a more informed, balanced perspective on the risks posed by people by looking at them as individuals rather than a homogeneous group.

Employers should be encouraged to develop their trust in individuals in an informed and supported way.

A Ministry of Justice initiative in 2018 focused on promoting a number of employers, such as Pret a Manger, Halfords, and Balfour Beatty, who had prioritised the employment of ex-offenders with the aim of encouraging more employers to consider the option of the employment of this group of people. However, there has been little focus on the employment of people with sexual convictions.¹⁷

In times of high levels of unemployment across the wider population, it is perhaps easier to understand employer reluctance to employ people with sexual convictions. However, when there are apparent skill shortages across a range of sectors, it is perhaps more surprising that employers are unwilling to take on people with sexual convictions, particularly when the reoffending rates of this group are so low.¹⁸ There is perhaps a role for the voluntary sector to take the lead, and for central and local government to offer advice, support, or incentives to take on and to safely manage this group of people. In addition, the education of voluntary sector and community-based organisations to safely open up their services to people convicted of sexual offences upon release from prison should be a priority. If necessary, organisations should be encouraged to develop appropriate risk planning and

In times of high levels of unemployment across the wider population, it is perhaps easier to understand employer reluctance to employ people with sexual convictions.

15. Kitson-Boyce, R., Blagden, N., Winder, B., and Dillon, G. (2018) '“This time it's different” Preparing for release through a prison-model of CoSA: A phenomenological and repertory grid analysis', *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 31(8), pp.886-907.
16. Waddell, G. and Burton, A. K. (2006) *Is work good for your health and well-being?* London: The Stationery Office.
17. Ministry of Justice (2018) *Employing prisoners and ex-offenders*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unlock-opportunity-employer-information-pack-and-case-studies/employing-prisoners-and-ex-offenders> (Accessed 04 July 2020).
18. Hanson and Bussière's (1998) meta-analysis reported that the average recidivism rate among people convicted of sexual offences is 13.4% (see n.6).

advised on how to manage different restrictions and requirements. These voluntary activities offer the opportunity to support the desire of individuals to atone for their wrongdoing and to 'give something back'.

Stigma and challenges

The impacts of the stigma of a sexual conviction on both an individual and their family have been analysed by a number of authors,¹⁹ and the provision of generic licence conditions²⁰ for this group arguably adds to the challenges facing a person in the transition from prison to the community, if not the stigma. The legal and administrative framework for the management and control of people with sexual convictions is significant.²¹ The rigid and inflexible application of generic licence conditions is not effective in reducing the risk of reoffending or in assisting an individual's successful resettlement and arguably does little to reduce reoffending. Although generic licence conditions are organisationally easier to administer, they do not have particular utility when dealing with the risks posed by individual people. A more individualised approach to both risk and risk management is likely to be more effective in achieving the desired outcome of controlling and monitoring an individual during their licence period. Licence conditions are more likely to achieve their objectives if they link in to risks identified by the prison-based offending behaviour programmes and an individual's self-identified risk.

The label 'sex offender' is almost certainly the cause of a significant amount of stigma.²² Criminal justice organisations and others need to move away from this negative shorthand, and labelling someone forever does not encourage them to see themselves as something other than that label. A proactive policy change with direction from the centre, supported and reinforced in official documents, policies, and legislation, would encourage this. If a person's desire is to be something different in the future from what they were in the past, they should be encouraged and

supported to do so, and not to forever be defined by (probably) the worst thing that they have ever done.

Accommodation and home

The importance of the provision of accommodation in the desistance process is well established.²³ However, the importance of a person having the opportunity to establish a home, a personal space, surrounded by their personal items, and having agency and control over this space, is not something that has previously been considered by the desistance literature. Whilst the majority of people with a sexual conviction with a high risk of sexual reoffending are provided with a short-term placement in Approved Premises of at least twelve weeks after they have left prison, lower-risk people are

not necessarily automatically provided with any accommodation. Although they must still inform the police of their whereabouts as part of the notification requirements, they often do not have the necessary financial backing to fund their own accommodation and they also often have significant difficulty in obtaining accommodation in the private rental sector because of their sexual conviction, as evidenced by the participants in this research.

Single men are generally not considered a priority group for social housing; if no family support is available, they will therefore potentially be homeless. Night shelters, bed and breakfast accommodation, or rough sleeping are often the only options available to them. Therefore, supported housing should be made available for isolated people with sexual convictions; this would reduce the risk posed to the public and also improve the well-being of the individual concerned.

Even after the initial period in Approved Premises, the accommodation arrangements for people with sexual convictions are often transitory and insecure. This insecurity potentially has an impact on a person's risk of reoffending. The importance of the creation of a home, rather than simply the provision of accommodation, is crucial to their well-being and therefore their successful resettlement.

These voluntary activities offer the opportunity to support the desire of individuals to atone for their wrongdoing and to 'give something back'.

19. Susman, J. (1994) 'Disability, stigma and deviance', *Social Science & Medicine*, 38(1), pp.15-22; Tewksbury, R. (2012) 'Stigmatization of sex offenders', *Deviant Behavior*, 33(8), pp.606-623.
20. National Offender Management Service (2015) *Licence Conditions, Licences and Licence and Supervision Notices. Prison Service Instruction 12/2015, Annex A*. Available at: <https://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/offenders/psipso/psi-2015/psi-12-2015-licences-conditions-licence-supervision-notices.pdf> (Accessed 04 July 2020).
21. Ministry of Justice (2012) MAPPa Guidance 2012 (version 4). London: MoJ.
22. Willis (2015), see n.3.
23. Allender, P., Brown, G., Bailey, N., Colombo, T., Poole, H., and Saldana, A. (2005) *Prisoner Resettlement and Housing Provision: A Good Practice Ideas Guide*. Coventry: Centre for Social Justice, Coventry University.

Clearly, this has implications for both government policy and also the provision of an adequate supply of suitable social housing. The link between safe housing and the re-establishment of an individual as part of a wider community is also a critical point. Although Approved Premises are a useful starting point for people when they leave prison, they are not a solution to the problem of the provision of safe, decent, secure housing, and more investment in suitable housing stock is required to ensure that this provision is sufficient. In addition, appropriate individualised risk assessments need to be factored into the process, rather than a generic, one-size-fits-all approach to the management of this group of people. This will require a change in policy and better communication between agencies in the management process.

Hope and future planning

Encouraging hope and planning for the future overlaps with a number of the other identified themes. How policymakers and practitioners working with people with sexual convictions can help both the well-being of the individual and also the desistance process is a critical issue for future planning; everyone has 'the right to hope'.²⁴ As a result, conditions legal, administrative, and practical need to be put in place to ensure that people with convictions for sexual offences have some degree of agency to manage their own risks and, therefore, their own future. Clearly, insight into what these risks are is critical, but so is the need to support people to manage these risks. In one example from this research, a participant's licence restrictions prevented him from going near a secondary school. However, as he said, he could simply go to a shopping centre if he wanted to look at teenagers; it was a matter for him to manage his risks. Another participant also knew what he needed to do not to be in the same situation that led to his offence and how to self-manage. Professionals cannot always be available to monitor, supervise, or oversee an individual. It is vital that an environment in the community is created whereby an individual sees and feels the benefits of not reoffending and has sufficient self-worth to manage their own behaviour and risks.

The wider use of anti-libidinal medication²⁵ to reduce sexual preoccupation is clearly an option for individuals to provide support to reduce the likelihood of sexual reoffending. Research participants who were taking such medication expressed the importance of their optimism and hope for the future as they

recognised that the medication not only had the potential to improve their well-being but also to reduce the likelihood of reoffending, thus satisfying the wider public protection aims of the criminal justice agencies. However, for such medication to be truly effective, an individual must have the choice to participate rather than being compelled to do so, therefore giving them realistic agency over their future plans.

Proactive ways of encouraging hope and optimism in prison and onwards into the community can also be promoted by peer-support projects and education in prison, including the Open University and vocational or business-skills programmes. In addition, prison community activities can improve the self-esteem and self-worth of individuals.

It is important to improve and foster a sense of agency and choice in the individual, creating and nurturing a feeling of hope and encouraging positive planning for the future so that they do not want to or feel the need to reoffend — in essence, to create a situation where the individual feels that they have a positive sense of self-worth and deserve more for themselves and others, rather than to create more victims and to spend more time in prison. Capitalising on this optimism should be key in the development of future policy and practice.

Conclusion

The experiences of the participants in the study indicate that the solutions to reduce sexual reoffending and successfully resettle people convicted of sexual offences in the community rests, unpopular and unpalatable as this may seem, not solely with the individual convicted of a sexual offence but with the institutions of the state, practitioners in the criminal justice system, employers, and the wider community. Changes to legal practice and public perceptions are critical if the risks people pose to others are to be safely and appropriately managed and people convicted of sexual offences are to be allowed to return to being active and productive citizens. The perception of these individuals as a homogeneous group of highly dangerous, manipulative, and predatory people needs to be challenged, and these labels should be confined to the very small number of people to whom they apply.

The practical suggestions resulting from the research can undoubtedly help in this ambition; however, fundamentally, fostering a wider understanding that people convicted of sexual offences are 'people like us', often with the same needs desires and personal issues, is a greater challenge.

24. European Court of Human Rights (2013) *Case of Vinter and Others v. The United Kingdom*. Available at: <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-122664> (Accessed 04 July 2020).

25. Winder, B., Lievesley, R., Elliott, H. J., Norman, C., and Kaul, A. (2014) 'Understanding the Journeys of High-risk Male Sex Offenders Voluntarily Receiving Medication to Reduce their Sexual Preoccupation and/or Hypersexuality' in Wilcox, D. T., Garrett, T., and Harkins, L. (eds.) *Sex Offender Treatment: A Case Study Approach to Issues and Interventions*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., pp.342-370.