

ARCBITE

Brokering Innovation Through Evidence

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Working in partnership to reduce re-offending rates and improve ex-offenders' lives: evaluating Active Lancashire's United Together project

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 death¹.

On release from prison, many ex-offenders face a range of barriers to reintegrating back into the community, such as stigma, substance misuse, social isolation, and a lack of access to housing and employment^{2,3}. These negatively impact on both physical and mental health, and often lead to an increased chance of re-offending.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) recognises the need to develop and deliver effective interventions which improve the life chances of people leaving prison and address health inequalities for this population⁴. These are likely to be multi-faceted and involve a range of organisations.

United Together

United Together⁵ is a unique initiative that uses a holistic approach to engaging with prison leavers to support them to overcome the barriers they are faced with on release from prison (e.g. social isolation, difficulties securing accommodation and employment), reduce chances of re-offending, and enable them to re-establish their place in the community. The delivery model used involved the following organisations working together in partnership to provide rounded support for prison leavers;

- Active Lancashire
- Cumbria Lancashire Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC)
- Burnley FC in the Community
- Accrington Stanley Community Trust
- Blackburn Rovers Community Trust

- Preston North End Community & Education Trust
- Blackpool FC Community Trust
- Fleetwood Town Community Trust
- Morecambe FC Community Sports
- Local Housing Associations

The project involves peer mentors, with lived experience of the criminal justice system, meeting prison leavers from day one of release and developing a personalised action plan with them to support their reintegration into the community. Prison leavers are supported to access a range of sport and physical activity sessions run by the Community Football Trusts involved, and are signposted to other targeted support, including housing, substance addiction recovery, training and employment.

The project has been running since 2019. United Together has received positive feedback from participants and has demonstrated success in improving wellbeing, increasing levels of physical activity and reducing re-offending. Active Lancashire, an ARC NWC member organisation, were interested in understanding more about what had influenced the project's success, and what could improve the delivery model and the partnerships involved.



What did we do?

This research conducted by ARC NWC's Equitable Place-based Health and Care (EPHC) and Implementation and Capacity Building (IMPACT) teams explored how the United Together project was delivered, the factors that had influenced its success, and the value of the partnership working approach used.

During August and September 2021, semi-structured interviews ($n=9$) and focus groups ($n=2$) were conducted with representatives from the partner organisations involved in managing and/or delivering the United Together project (Active Lancashire, North West Probation Service, Community Football Trusts, Preston Prison). Individuals in strategic roles ($n=6$) and in delivery roles ($n=8$) were asked to reflect on their experiences of the project and the value of partnership working. Ethical approval was gained from Lancaster University's Faculty of Health Medicine's Ethics Committee.

How did we involve people?

Two members of the public with lived experience of the criminal justice system were recruited to be involved in designing and interpreting the research. Monthly meetings of a steering group involving the public advisers, Active Lancashire colleagues, and ARC NWC researchers are taking place to discuss the research design, the findings, and plan next steps.

What did we find out?

Peer mentors' lived experience and their ability to engage with prison leavers was viewed as a vital element of the project. Partner representatives felt that the involvement of the football clubs was appealing to the project's participants. Taking part in physical activity sessions was seen as a way of reducing re-offending as it offered prison leavers structure to their free time, social support, and a sense of belonging.

All partner representatives felt that the partnership was made up of the right organisations and possessed the relevant skill mix to deliver effective services to prison leavers. Partnership working was facilitated by effective and regular communication. It was suggested that developing clearer working agreements such as information sharing, risk assessments, and clarity of roles and service offers would improve the

project going forward. Services were viewed as under-resourced, and that current funding was not sufficient to sustain the project longer-term.

What works well in delivering the project?

- Characteristics of staff involved, including peer mentors' lived experience
- Relationship building with prison leavers and adopting a person-centred approach
- Accessibility of services (e.g. location)
- Football club involvement
- Using physical activity as a vehicle for behaviour change

What are the barriers to delivery?

- Challenges associated with safeguarding and risk assessment
- A lack of clarity on the activities on offer from Football Clubs

What external factors influence delivery?

- COVID-19 restrictions and the impact on service delivery
- Funding and resources available

What supports partnership working?

- Building professional networks
- Communication and relationship building between organisations and staff
- Partnership being made up of a relevant skill mix

What can be done differently?

- Sufficient planning before undertaking the project (e.g. agreeing processes)
- Sharing information between organisations
- Implementing a longer-term collaborative approach to delivering services

What have we learnt and what next?

This research found that approaching the rehabilitation of ex-offenders through a combination of peer mentoring and physical activity, supported by partnership working and signposting, is viewed positively by those managing and delivering services. Addressing the barriers identified and maintaining what is working well as identified in the table above could improve the delivery of the project.

Active Lancashire is now working closely with the North West Probation Service, a combined service which unified the CRC and National Probation Service. Limited funding has been secured to allow the partnership to continue working together and respond to the findings of the research conducted by ARC NWC.

Further reading

1. Revolving Doors (2017). [Rebalancing act: a resource for public health, police and crime commissioners, service provider and user.](#)
2. Burgess-Allen et al. (2006). [The health needs of ex-prisoners, implications for successful resettlement: a qualitative study.](#) *International Journal of Prisoner Health.*
3. Buck et al. (2021). [The facilitators and barriers faced when transitioning back into the community following a prison sentence.](#) *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology.*
4. Ministry of Justice (2020). [Areas of research interest.](#)
5. Active Lancashire (2021). [United Together.](#)

What is NIHR ARC North West Coast?

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration North West Coast (ARC NWC) brings together universities, health and social care organisations, members of the public, and local authorities in the North West Coast region. Its aim is to undertake applied health research to improve the quality, delivery and efficiency of service delivery, reduce health inequalities, and increase the sustainability of the health and care system both locally and nationally. For further information, visit: <https://arc-nwc.nihr.ac.uk/>

The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR, or the Department of Health and Social Care.