Service user involvement in the review and improvement of probation services

HM Inspectorate of Probation

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Context

There has been growing attention in recent years to the potential benefits of Service User Involvement (SUI)[1], and this bulletin focuses upon its use in the review and development of probation services in England and Wales. Through exploring the current approaches adopted by Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and the National Probation Service (NPS), reflecting the views of both staff and service users[2], we sought to examine the benefits and challenges to this work, and the key enablers for its successful delivery.

Approach

The findings are based on a two-stage approach. An initial survey of CRCs and NPS divisions provided an overview of the work being undertaken. Sites which appeared to be actively undertaking SUI were then selected for a fieldwork visit, or telephone interviews were undertaken with key staff members. During site visits, the views of both staff and service users were sought via interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis of this data revealed a number of benefits and challenges with SUI work. Co-production sessions with peer researchers from Revolving Doors Agency provided sense-checking for the findings.

Key findings and implications

- A range of approaches to SUI work are being employed across probation services including service user councils, peer mentoring, surveys, focus groups and consultations.

- Across all sites visited, SUI work was being facilitated and supported by committed staff who strongly believed in its value.

- Service users were also dedicated to this work. They identified benefits at a personal and organisational level – SUI could facilitate self-efficacy, social benefits, professional development, and desistance from further offending, and could allow them to have a positive impact both on other service users and on probation service delivery.

- Challenges were also identified by service users, including the time commitment required, the lack of acceptance by some staff, as well as difficulties in engaging others.

- Staff found SUI beneficial for gaining service users' perspectives, improving service delivery, utilising service users' skills, and providing a refocus for probation work.

- Challenges identified by staff included integrating the work successfully into probation culture, engaging a representative range of service users, negotiating/recognising the boundaries of service users working alongside staff, the

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[1] Sometimes other terms such as 'lived experience' or Service User Engagement are used. For consistency we will use the term SUI throughout this report, except where other terms are included in direct quotes.
[2] In the current context, 'service users' means those under probation supervision rather than victims or families who may come in to contact with probation services.

current lack of investment in terms of both time and resources, and difficulties in implementing SUI proposals.

- Based upon our research findings, the following are set out as key enablers for the successful delivery of SUI:
  - o Strategic direction to support the balance between the value placed on 'lived' and 'learned' experience.[3]
  - o Clear guidance in relation to inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation, the boundaries of SUI work, reward and remuneration, and potential opportunities for employment.
  - o Maintaining a focus upon the welfare of service users involved in SUI work.
  - o Effective communication of SUI work across organisations.
  - o Open discussions with staff to ease any tensions and misunderstandings around SUI.
  - o Dedicated funding and staff resources.
  - o Use of existing toolkits, practice guides and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Standards of Excellence.
- Bearing in mind that the delivery of probation services is to undergo further change, it is essential that the valuable SUI work currently taking place is not disrupted or lost.

Figure 1: Key enablers for successful delivery

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[3] See p.6 below for an explanation of the distinction between 'lived' and 'learned' experience.

1. Introduction

Service users are playing an active role in shaping probation service delivery across many areas in England and Wales through SUI. This is being undertaken via a range of different approaches including gathering views through 'one-way' consultations; establishing service user councils; or by greater involvement and co-production to shape the delivery of specific interventions. This bulletin focuses on the views of staff and service users undertaking SUI in both CRCs and the NPS, identifying what they perceive to be the benefits and challenges to this work.

Key definitions

Clinks (2016) outline a definition of SUI:

> *'Service user involvement is where an organisation involves service users in the planning, management, delivery or evaluation of the services that it provides'* (Clinks, 2016).

In terms of co-production, Bovaird and Loeffler (2013) offer this definition:

> *'Professionals and citizens making better use of each other's assets, resources, and contributions, to achieve better outcomes and/or improve efficiency'.*

Effectively, co-production emphasises that it takes both professionals and service users to produce outcomes, by each utilising the benefits of the other's capabilities.

To clearly distinguish the knowledge and value brought to probation services by service users and staff, the terms 'lived' and 'learned' experience are sometimes used:

- 'Lived' experience relates to the contribution provided by service users, and highlights that it is their own personal experiences, particularly of the criminal justice system, which enables them to offer a valuable perspective on probation services.
- 'Learned' experience relates to the contribution provided by staff, and emphasises that they have gained a detailed understanding of probation services through training and professional experience.

Clinks (2016) have identified two main benefits of actively involving service users in the review and development of services:

(i) Getting first-hand experiences of service users is beneficial for providers; 'involving them in your work brings unique insights'.

(ii) Benefits are noted for the individuals themselves, as their active involvement and participation is believed to contribute to positive change by helping with their desistance[4] and increasing confidence, as well as improving their skills by providing wider opportunities for training and employment.

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[4] Desistance refers to the processes by which people move away from offending behaviour.

Revolving Doors Agency (2016) adapted Arnstein's 1969 'ladder of participation' (see Figure 2 below) which sets out a range of SUI work from 'no control', where the user is a passive consumer, up through 'information', 'consultation', 'participation', 'sharing power' to 'full control' where the service user controls decision making at the highest level.

Figure 2: The ladder of participation

Much of the SUI research focuses on co-production and personalisation within healthcare settings. However, there is some research within criminal justice and probation. For example, Hubbard (2014) provided a useful account of the development and implementation of service user councils within one probation trust (London) prior to *Transforming Rehabilitation*.[5] Hubbard then outlines a number of benefits. For service users themselves, the councils appeared to support desistance, and barriers between staff and service users were beginning to break down.

The Clinks (2011) research highlighted emerging areas of good practice in probation and prisons around SUI. At the time of this report, it was found that SUI was more developed in prisons than across the probation trusts – partially explained by the fact there is a more 'captive audience' in prisons. It was felt that SUI was occurring in 'pockets across the trusts without permeating more widely' (Clinks, 2011: 26). For example:

- 30 per cent of probation trusts had service user groups at the local delivery level

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[5] In June 2014, 35 self-governing probation trusts were replaced by a new public sector NPS with seven divisions, and 21 CRCs owned by eight organisations, each different in constitution and outlook. The NPS advises courts on sentencing all offenders, and retains those offenders who present a high or very high risk of serious harm or who are managed under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). CRCs supervise most other offenders presenting a low or medium risk of serious harm – these cases are allocated to them post-sentence by the NPS.

- 17 per cent consulted with service users at a trust level
- 33 per cent ran focus groups around particular functions or specific needs
- only 2 of the 35 trusts had service user contributions in staff meetings.

The research focused on various aspects of SUI, including examining recruitment, definition of the role (for service users), format and management of service user groups, processes to follow, and barriers. The latter were found to link to the following:

- staff apprehension
- culture (high-level strategies needed)
- service users' reluctance to get involved (with over-reliance on a few)
- lack of a captive audience
- sustainability of SUI
- managing transitions from custody to community.

A more recent piece of work by Weaver, Moodie and Lightowler (2017) explored the views of 30 professionals and service users with SUI experience from a range of community justice agencies across Ayrshire. SUI was seen to be beneficial in that it could improve service quality both for the delivery organisation and individual service users. It could also facilitate staff and service users working together effectively to achieve these changes. For service users, the benefits of involvement included personal development, providing a sense of purpose and structure to their days, a sense of belonging, and an opportunity to give something back. To enable SUI, it was emphasised that:

- the practicalities needed to be considered
- relationships and mutual trust were crucial
- service users needed to have the opportunity to influence
- a range of opportunities for involvement should be made available.

Potential barriers were also identified, including individual challenges for service users such as a lack of confidence, poor past experiences of services, personal circumstances and lifestyles, and potential suspicion/mistrust. Structural barriers could be an issue, as some types of SUI may be less appealing than others, and care should be taken to ensure that opportunities allow for real impact and are not tokenistic.

Finally, common SUI challenges and solutions were considered. The involuntary nature of the service user's relationship with the criminal justice system and issues of power and powerlessness were recognised. However, notwithstanding this, opportunities for voluntary engagement could be maximised by ensuring that a good range of choices for involvement were made available. Listening to what matters to service users and what they value was also found to be key. Considerable value was seen in engaging as many people as possible, including those whose voices were hard to reach and those at an earlier point in their desistance journeys. A supportive professional culture should be available to allow staff to make and learn from mistakes, and an emphasis should be placed on awareness, training and support. Resources also needed to be in place, including staff to drive, implement and help deliver SUI, as well as the supporting finances.

Based on this research, the authors have published a practice guide to support professionals and service users work together to shape the design, development, and delivery of services within criminal justice (Weaver, Lightowler and Moodie, 2019).

There is currently no up to date picture of different models or types of SUI within probation service provision in England and Wales. Clinks conducted a review for the National Offender

Management Service (NOMS) in 2011 but since that time, *Transforming Rehabilitation* has been implemented which has led to wide-ranging difficulties in the delivery of probation services (HMI Probation, 2019a). There is also limited evidence of how the distinct types of SUI operate or what is felt to be working well and is most beneficial, from the perspectives of probation providers or service users. However, the work by Weaver, Moodie and Lightowler (2017) does provide some valuable insights.

This research project therefore examines the type and nature of SUI in probation. In particular, it examines the following:

- the current approaches used by probation providers to gather service users' views and experiences of service delivery

- the views and experiences of probation providers and service users on the use of the SUI approaches, including perceptions as to the benefits, identifying any developing areas of good practice

- the key enablers and barriers to service user participation and involvement within a probation context.

Inspection standards

Our current inspections of probation services are underpinned by standards which are grounded in evidence, learning and experience. In developing the standards, we worked constructively with providers and others to build a common view of high-quality probation services and what should be expected.

The standards are grouped within three domains, the first of which, organisational delivery, covers how well the organisation is led, managed, and set up. Within this domain, the following prompt is applicable to SUI.

1.4 Information and facilities

Timely and relevant information is available and appropriate facilities are in place to support a high quality, personalised, and responsive approach for all service users.

1.4.4   Is analysis, evidence, and learning used effectively to drive improvement?

e) Are the views of service users and other key stakeholders sought, analysed, and used to review and improve the effectiveness of services?

2. Findings

The findings presented in this bulletin are based upon two stages of research:

(i) an initial online survey to all CRCs and NPS divisions completed by key SUI staff
(ii) site visits which included focus groups and interviews with staff and service users to gain a greater understanding of the SUI work taking place, as well as benefits and challenges of this work.

The initial online survey was sent to the 21 CRCs and seven NPS divisions in October 2018, with 12 CRCs and five NPS divisions responding[6]. The aim of the survey was to gain an initial understanding of the different types of SUI activity being undertaken and the strategic oversight for this work, as well as an overview of the specific benefits and challenges.

Following on from the survey, providers with emerging or established SUI activity were approached for a site visit. Fieldwork took place in three CRCs and one NPS division, reflecting the recent CRC developments in this area, with focus groups and interviews being undertaken with staff and service users who were currently engaged in established SUI. The staff included peer mentor coordinators, strategic leads, Heads of Service Delivery/ Operations, responsible officers, CRC Directors, Senior Probation Officers, as well as staff from User Voice who were involved in supporting the service user councils and associated service user engagement. The service users included those who had trained as peer mentors and service user council representatives.

In addition, telephone interviews were undertaken with key staff in two other NPS divisions – this occurred where site visits were not possible or where the work was only in the emerging stages. A policy representative from HMPPS was also interviewed.

Further details about the methodology and the analysis conducted are provided in Annex A. The project benefited from the involvement of the Revolving Doors Agency lived experience peer research team. The peer researchers assisted with the scoping for the research, the fieldwork, and the sense-checking of findings.

2.1   Initial survey findings

2.1.1 Types of service user involvement

Probation providers could highlight up to five types of SUI with which they were currently involved. All 17 of the responding providers were currently working with service users to seek their input into the delivery of services and interventions. Four providers had only one type of SUI activity, seven had two types of SUI activity, four identified three types, and two providers identified four types. The types are detailed below (numbers of incidences in parenthesis):

- Service user councils (11)

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[6] Three CRCs under one prime provided a combined response, and one CRC provided responses from two different people – these responses were slightly different and both were analysed to provide a full overview of the work being undertaken. Two further CRCs provided information via email correspondence – as these were not full survey responses, they were not included in the analysis presented here (although they were considered as part of the evidence informing stage two of the research).

- Surveys (9)
- Focus groups (7)
- Consultations (3)
- Suggestion boxes (1)
- Drop-in sessions (1)
- Other (7) including:
    - engagement boards[7]
    - peer support groups
    - peer mentoring.

2.1.2 Strategic oversight

The responsibility for SUI sat within different units or teams in the CRCs and NPS divisions. Often this was in specific directorates or units, and/or with specific people, e.g. a Community Director, senior leadership/management teams, CRC Directors, or Deputy Directors, or in conjunction with other teams (e.g. interventions and research). CRCs tended to highlight the strategic overview of SUI activity in the context of individuals at senior level chairing service user council meetings.

2.1.3 Aims and objectives

Providers were asked to select the aims and objectives of the different types of SUI activity with which they were involved (from a provided list of options). As set out in Table 1[8], the most common responses were (i) service and/or intervention delivery, (ii) service and/or intervention design, and (iii) monitoring and evaluation. They were least likely to use SUI for the selection and recruitment of staff.

Table 1: Aims and objectives of SUI

| Aim/objective	% yes
Service and/or intervention delivery	26%
Service and/or intervention design	25%
Monitoring and evaluation	22%
Development of training and/or guidance	14%
Committee or board member involvement	7%
Other (please specify)	4%
Selection and recruitment of staff	2%

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[7] Engagement boards take forward operational issues which arise from service user councils/surgeries, with an expectation that local teams will take practical steps to implement or make improvements in line with the recommendations made.
[8] Figures presented are across all types of SUI.

2.2 Benefits highlighted by staff

The staff we spoke to as part of this research all advocated the value of SUI, identifying a number of benefits associated with the work (summarised in Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: Benefits highlighted by staff
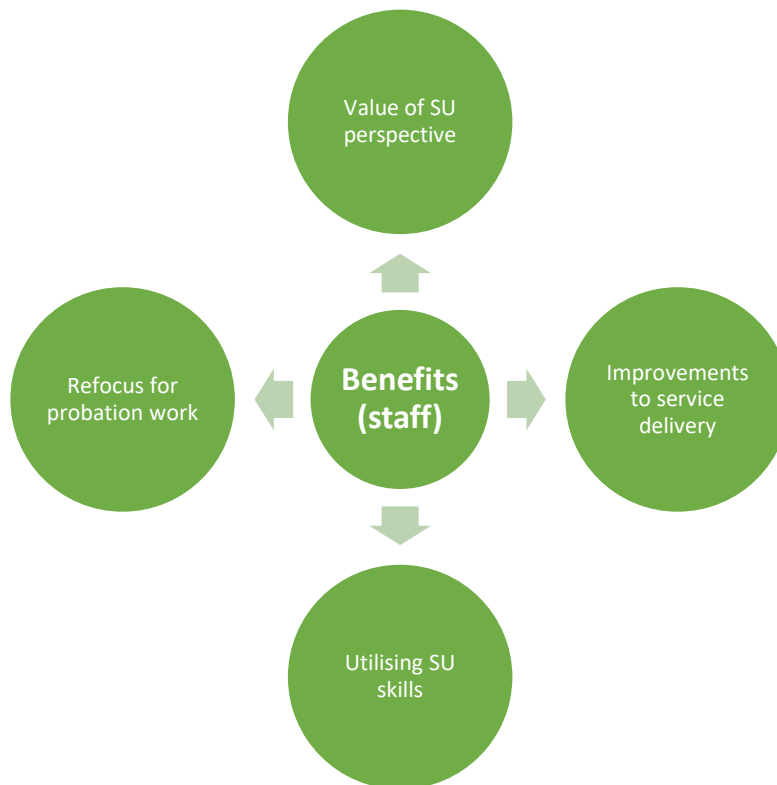
2.2.1 Value of the service users' perspective

Being able to gain the perspective of the service user was seen by staff as one of the main benefits of SUI work. This first-hand, lived experience of receiving probation services was believed to be beneficial in identifying areas for improvement and generating new ideas. Staff also placed value in service users being offered a *"safe space"* in which to speak:

> *"The power of it for me is just people being heard. Sometimes you feel that they haven't been used to being heard".* (CRC Director)

We saw examples where service users identified difficulties which had not occurred to staff. In one instance, it was deemed necessary to make staff aware that those who had spent a considerable amount of time in prison may not be as up to date with technology as has been assumed:

> *"One of the issues raised was that it was a cost to them to be phoning the probation office on lots of occasions. That was something staff had not considered before. While some SUs have free minutes, a lot don't. So it was about understanding this and that the SUs have limited resources in that their technology is probably 10-15 years behind, whereas that of staff is more ahead".* (Responsible officer)

Service users in one locality raised a concern regarding the impolite way staff spoke to them in the waiting area. As there were no dedicated reception staff, this role was being undertaken by responsible officers on a rota basis, many of whom were unhappy with this additional role on top of their already heavy workloads. However, attitudes were not deemed to be acceptable, and as a result of this issue being raised, staff were sent on customer service training.

It was not just ideas for practical changes which staff saw as beneficial. Hearing first-hand about the detrimental impact which some probation practices were having on service users could provide the impetus for change. Service users recalled that they disliked seeing different responsible officers for their appointments, as this resulted in them having to go over their details and background on multiple occasions. Even though this has previously been identified as poor practice in literature and inspection reports, having it raised directly by service users helped to focus the need for it to be rectified:

> *"I think for me as well it sometimes formalises how certain things may, how service users feel. Like just that example where they feel as though they are having to explain time and time again what their issue is and how that impacts on them, how it makes them feel, how they are probably less likely to engage further because they feel like they've got to explain again. And it's really powerful I think, to explain that back to our staff as well and explain that part of things".* (CRC Director)

> *"Because there are some things that can be quite traumatic to have to keep retelling the story, you know, and it's more than just inconvenient and a bit tiring".* (Senior Probation Officer)

2.2.2 Improvements to service delivery

The real value of SUI work was that it did not end at identifying issues or areas for development, but service users were instrumental in suggesting constructive and reasonable solutions. To address the issue of having to retell one's story multiple times to different responsible officers, service users suggested that staff take a short time before appointments to review the main details of their case. Subsequently this requirement was disseminated to staff and was expected to become standard practice.

A solution was also offered by service users in relation to the need for responsible officers/offender managers to contact those on their caseload while still in prison, as many stated that they had not been aware they had a designated responsible officer until they were released. Staff recalled being impressed by the pragmatic nature of their solution, which although simple, could potentially have a significant and positive impact on those in custody:

> *"But, actually, their proposal was not about, you know, let's visit every other day, you know. What they were looking for was just a quick note that goes in, a postcard or whatever into the prison that says 'Your offender manager is such and such. We know you are there'. That's actually all they wanted because that's probably as much as we could do. So, you get the added value, I guess; some solutions and constructive ideas rather than just identification of the problem".* (CRC Director)

Making a change to the language used within probation was another area which service users felt determined to influence. The proposal of removing the word 'offender' was

accepted and seen to be within the bounds of what could be changed. But the impact on service users and the way they were perceived could be quite significant:

> *"We made a proposal because a lot of people were saying, "Well I'm not an offender anymore". But the proposal was around removing the term 'offender' from job titles and literature, which they've jumped on straight away because they saw it as an easy win. And then they consulted around the name, and service users came up with 'responsible officer' because it was being used in other places, and removed the term 'offender' from the literature. This was a really positive step, and there was a sort of buy-in from them at the start".* (User Voice staff)

Ensuring that the impact of SUI work was disseminated across organisations to both staff and other service users was also seen to be of importance, as this would allow others to become aware of the positive and practical influence which it could have.

2.2.3 Utilising service users' skills

Service users were seen by staff as having particular skills from their lived experience which could help them to make connections with those currently going through the probation process. Since those involved in SUI had made progress in their desistance journey, it was felt that they could be a positive role model[9] or inspiration to others. In addition, being free from the constraints of staff workloads, it was felt that some service users could dedicate the time required to engage effectively with service users.

In one instance, during the morning break of a session for younger service users, one participant was seen standing outside the room, looking as though he was preparing to leave. The peer mentor then engaged with him, discovered the issue which was affecting him, and managed to turn the situation around. The staff member saw that the real value was that he was willing to sit and have a chat with the young person and could also offer some words of advice:

> *"And this kid was like 'my nan has just died. I am feeling a bit low'. Then they wandered around the corner and were chatting. It turns out the kid was wanting to go home. But the peer mentor spoke to him and talked to him about the importance of changing. And the Prince's Trust were there that day. This lad who was going home at 11 o'clock stayed until 1.30, signed up for the Prince's Trust, and his whole demeanour changed in that time".* (Responsible officer)

Service users could also apply specific skills for engaging those currently receiving probation supervision, and for supporting their desistance. At one site, a spoken word artist who had previously worked in the criminal justice system was used to help develop and deliver programmes:

> *"I've got one, he is a spoken word artist. He went to prison and got clean, as he was a crack and heroin user. He's also worked in the criminal justice system before. So, when he came out, he came to me, and because he had previously worked around knife crime with young people I thought I could actually utilise him in quite of lot that we do. So he actually got involved in delivering some of the programmes with*

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[9] It should be noted that in one of our co-production sessions where we analysed this data alongside peer researchers, they noted some reluctance to use the term 'role model', preferring instead inspiration.

me and now we also write programmes together. Because he has got a really good imagination". (Responsible officer)

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Good practice example

Across a number of Wales NPS Approved Premises (APs), SUI was being used in a range of ways to help support the generation of meaningful relationships as part of an enabling environment. Due to the importance of the induction for facilitating the transition to the community, service users were asked to provide feedback on the process and contribute ideas. As a complement to the induction, a buddying system was in place, where new residents were paired up with a more established peer, who could talk them though the realities of living within the AP. Service users were also encouraged to take an active role in running weekly residents' meetings alongside staff.

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2.2.4 Providing a refocus for probation work

A final benefit identified by staff was that learning more about people as individuals rather than just service users or cases could be a useful reminder about the importance and value of their work. This could easily be lost due to the sheer volume and intensity of workloads faced by probation practitioners.

The impact on staff of a peer mentor graduation ceremony was highlighted at one site. This had been an opportunity to recognise and celebrate the achievement of training to be peer mentors, and a range of staff not currently involved in SUI work were invited to attend. Returning the focus of probation work away from the numerous daily tasks and back to the real people who they were supporting was seen as hugely beneficial:

> *"The peer mentoring graduation ceremony had all the offender managers there, and it was really enriching. It keeps people connected with the point of what they are doing, which sometimes can be difficult in a very process-heavy way. But sometimes you lose sight of the outcomes you are trying to achieve, whereas, you know, peer mentoring is a real injection of the outcome really".* (CRC Director)

This sentiment was echoed by another staff member who had been initially reluctant to undertake SUI work, failing to see the benefit. However, after being encouraged to do it through an initiative at the time, he reflected that it had been a very important experience for him, as it now allowed him *"to see the person behind the risk"*. He believed he had previously lost sight of this perspective.

The impact which could be achieved by treating service users as individuals was also seen to be an important aspect of SUI. The director at one CRC described being able to speak to a member of the service user council who he recognised in the reception waiting area as *"heartening"*. Reflecting on this statement, he said:

> *"I know that has a big impact on him [the council rep], not because of anything I do but it's that kind of recognition that, you know, he's part of something and there's a kind of recognition of people doing quite well and they're getting on. That recognition of that fact and treating people as human beings".* (CRC Director)

2.3   Challenges highlighted by staff

Although, on the whole, staff spoke positively about SUI, there were a number of areas which they identified as presenting challenges to this work.

Figure 4: Challenges highlighted by staff
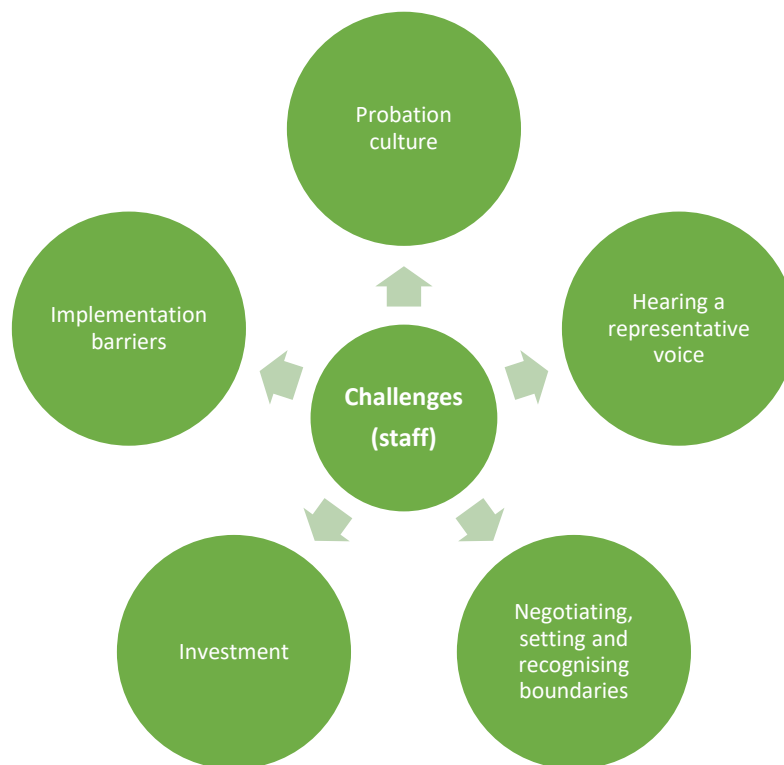
2.3.1 Probation culture

In this research we spoke with staff who were committed to the benefits of SUI. They noted, however, that this commitment was not uniform across their organisations, as a degree of wariness had been observed among some staff in relation to involving those with lived experience in the development of probation services.

There were a variety of reasons as to why staff might be resistant to fully embracing SUI. Some staff could potentially feel threatened by this seeming change to the status quo:

> *"In the new generation of probation workers, you are going to have a lot of people with lived experience as opposed to learned knowledge or learned experience. Generally speaking, probation, for as long as I have known it, has been governed by academics. This is new. It's that fear of the unknown. In the future what's it going to look like? And people tend to be more comfortable with what they know. So I think threatened is probably one of the emotions".* (Peer mentor coordinator)

Staff may also find it challenging to see a degree of control being handed over to those whom they are supervising:

> *"In some cases, offender managers are seeing someone who not long ago was sitting in reception waiting for an appointment. That person is now walking in their office, sitting at their own work station, with their own laptop. So that brings a lot of questions".* (Peer mentor coordinator)

> *"Staff are possibly a bit threatened with their role. I've heard numerous comments by officers that they don't want service users, they don't see it as part of the remit for probation. They have not bought into it yet".* (Peer mentor coordinator)

The implementation of *Transforming Rehabilitation* resulted in an extended period of change and uncertainty for staff, some of whom had been left feeling unsettled and lacking security in their jobs. The idea that service users may now also be doing aspects of their work and potentially competing for these roles had led some to feel that service users were a professional threat. This concern was discussed by one member of staff who was challenged about the motive behind training service users as peer mentors:

> *"Staff would say 'you're getting volunteers to do our work for us so you can employ less of us'. And my response was 'well it's costing far more than employing you because we are doing it properly'. It would be cheaper to employ staff than do our peer mentor approach".* (CRC Director)

Tensions were also apparent in the value which was being placed on lived as opposed to learned experience[10]. A phrase associated with some SUI work is that 'only offenders can stop reoffending', which has links to the desistance literature and its recognition of individual service users as the agents of change (Maruna and Mann, 2019). However, certain interpretations of this slogan were seen to irritate staff, who felt that their training and years of professional experience were being undermined and potentially dismissed.

Even those who appreciated the added value of SUI work were keen to stress that one approach should not be viewed as superior to the other. Each added value and they should be regarded as complementary rather than in conflict:

> *"I think lived experience is really valuable. But if you are running around shouting that lived experience is more valuable than learned experience, then I think we're on dodgy ground there because actually you're undermining. How about, you know, we have this partnership where everything is as valuable?"* (Responsible officer)

> *"Let's value each other and respect each other and that's good".* (Responsible officer)

The potential risks associated with SUI was another barrier to staff engagement with the SUI process:

> *"People would get kind of nervous around service users, you know, kind of impose security, letting through locked doors etc. And there was a bit of reticence around local offices engaging, that people perhaps didn't feel as welcome as I might have liked".* (CRC Director)

As good practice, at one site they held a meeting with staff, specifically to talk about the barriers to accepting SUI work. This was not intended to be confrontational but to

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[10] It is recognised that these forms of experience are not necessarily neatly attributable to role; responsible officers may also have lived experiences and some service users may have learned experiences.

encourage open dialogue with the goal of moving towards a greater understanding of the motivations and potential positive impacts of this work.

Good practice example

In Merseyside CRC, separate meetings were held with both staff and service users to explore how SUI could be embedded across the organisation. Through discussions co-facilitated by staff, service users, and representatives from User Voice, those taking part were asked to consider the advantages for frontline staff of including service users in their work, to suggest possible opportunities for SUI, and identify who needed to be involved in taking this forward. Barriers to involving service users in the CRC were also explored, but importantly also the ways in which these barriers could be overcome. These sessions were intended to encourage open dialogue with the goal of moving towards a greater understanding of the potential positive impacts which this work could have both at an individual and organisational level.

Failing to communicate SUI work across an organisation was seen as a missed opportunity for its promotion. Concern was raised that the excellent work taking place, and the impact for service users and the organisation, was not being successfully cascaded. As such, staff were not aware of the positive outcomes. When there was an interest in SUI work this seemed to be sporadic, whereas a consistent input was needed for the messages to get across:

> *"When we have good news stories, they will come and take photographs, you know, once a month we might get the odd picture on the intranet. But people don't even read the intranet, you know. People need to be more aware".* (Peer mentor coordinator)

> *"A really good thing we had last year. I got invited to the local radio when it was volunteering week. And I took a couple of peer mentors there. And for their self-esteem it was just up there, their families, their friends, everyone was talking about it. It was brilliant. That needs to become more".* (Peer mentor coordinator)

Having former service users become members of staff was seen as a significant achievement, not only for that individual, but also for the probation service who had played a facilitating role. But staff noted that such achievements often appeared to go unrecognised.

2.3.2 Hearing a representative voice

For SUI work to be fully effective, there was a desire to gain a wide range of representation. However, getting a full range of service users involved in the process was seen to be challenging, and concerns were raised that certain groups were less likely to be involved, posing the question, 'whose voice is being heard?'

It was apparent from observations of service council meetings and meetings with peer mentors that they were largely articulate, confident in expressing their views, and appeared to be in a relatively stable place in their lives. And while their voice added considerable value to the process, they could not be considered as necessarily representative of all probation service users. Staff were asked whether there were any inclusion criteria for considering those to recommend for SUI. The general response was that there were no formal

guidelines, but that there may be a need to identify individuals who were going to be constructive.

It should be noted, however, that although gaining as wide a range of perspectives as possible would be the ideal, it was apparent that SUI would not be suitable for everyone. When looking to recruit service users, it was imperative that responsible officers did not consider training such as that for peer mentoring as a tool for commencing rehabilitation, as they should already be on that journey.

A phrase which was used on several occasions by staff was that you needed to be able to recognise when a service user was 'there', that is, at a stage in their lives that they had a degree of security in their identity, were compliant, and could communicate their views in a constructive and helpful way. In addition, for certain forms of SUI, particularly peer mentoring, being able to reflect on one's actions and take appropriate responsibility was seen as essential in order to be able to support another person with their desistance. Until this was acknowledged, the service user could not be seen as having the correct mindset to act as a mentor:

> *"A young lady that I was working with and she was 'Oh I got sent to prison and it wasn't my fault. It was all my boyfriend's fault.' That's not 'there'. Because that's undermining the work that we're trying to do. 'I got sent to prison because I made bad choices'. That's 'there'".* (Responsible officer)

> *"They need to be at the right time in their life to do it. A good peer mentor needs to be at a stage where they want to change, they are willing to say a bit about their journey".* (Peer mentor co-ordinator)

It was also noted that there will be some service users who just may not be suitable for this process, or it may just not be the right time for them.

> *"If that person isn't totally committed to the scheme, and you know has the resolve to complete it and also to support all the things that come with completion, typically they are going to drop off, aren't they?"* (Peer mentor coordinator)

> *"One of them [service user who wished to do SUI] had serious mental health issues, and I thought he was very reclusive, didn't want to come out and stuff like that. And I felt with him at the moment I'd be pushing him backwards not forwards. But then I said, 'if I meet you in another two months to see where you are then, and if you're totally different from the way I am seeing you now, then we can move forward with it".* (User Voice staff member)

In addition, it should be appreciated that not everyone will wish to be a part of SUI, and that such decisions need to be respected.

Engagement with some specific sub-groups could also be difficult, but for very differing reasons which did not necessarily apply to all types of SUI. For example, the structure of women's services could present a challenge; whereas in standard probation settings, service users' views could be obtained by speaking to them in reception waiting areas, women-only centres did not generally have this facility. In contrast, one staff member spoke about the challenges of trying to recruit younger adults (aged 18-24) as peer mentors, highlighting their levels of maturity:

> *"With that younger age group, it's quite difficult to pull those through because of maturity and getting them through that process. Youngsters tend to look up to the*

older ones whereas with people on their level, it's more difficult. So, it's more difficult for the younger peer mentors and more difficult for the youngsters sort of relating to them". (Responsible officer)

It was also felt that not all staff were considering the potential for SUI work with the full range of service users:

"The case managers need to recognise all levels of people are useful, if they recognise an ability in that person is to bring it up with them. I don't think there's enough case management involvement in bringing people forward for SUI". (User Voice staff member)

2.3.3 Negotiating, setting and recognising boundaries

Some challenges were also experienced when negotiating and setting the boundaries inherent in SUI work. One area in which this was identified was in relation to risk, and the need to balance the added value which could result from service users' involvement with the risk which being involved in this work could pose to their own recovery or that of others. An example was provided where a service user had become heavily involved in both developing and delivering programmes, but then he relapsed in terms of his drug use. This clearly made him unsuitable to carry on in this role. Although this was a difficult situation to handle, it was helped by the fact that boundaries for his involvement had already been established:

"I suppose it was just a decision that I knew I had to make really. Because we set the boundaries right at the start. As soon as there was a positive drug test, he knew that as well, that I had to pull the plug at that point. But it was quite difficult when you are working with somebody because it's about those boundaries as well. Because he was actually delivering programmes with me, that sets up a different relationship. And you do treat them differently when that happens". (Responsible officer)

Another example was given of a service user with a prior domestic abuse conviction who had been co-facilitating sessions. He was keen to become a peer mentor and work closely with other domestic abuse perpetrators. As the organisation held a rigorous process for vetting peer mentors, relevant concerns were recognised and this allowed a plan to be put in place to help reduce this risk:

"At the panel meeting for vetting potential peer mentors, he disclosed that he was back with his partner, that things were great. However, the panel were not satisfied that sufficient time had lapsed for him to support someone else who also had a domestic violence conviction. As such, we built in additional time to monitor the risk. After a few months, he was deemed suitable to go on to volunteer and this turned out as a success". (Community Director)

Service users could assume voluntary positions within probation services which were highly valued, and this could result in them working very closely alongside paid staff. The line between service user and staff then had the potential to become blurred, which could in turn create difficulties when the distinction once more became apparent. In one instance, a staff member recalled that a service user had become knowledgeable and invested in a topic, and had helped to deliver training sessions which were very positively received. Difficulties arose, however, when it was not possible to turn this contribution into paid employment, leading him to take an unrelated job elsewhere. During the process of his

volunteering he had become an important part of the team, but when it became apparent that he could only continue on a voluntary basis, this created serious tensions, with the service user leaving feeling unappreciated.

Where volunteering work did translate into paid work, this could also create challenges, and a need was identified for the transition to be handled thoughtfully. Where those involved in SUI had successfully become responsible officers, the reality of the role which they had been striving towards did not necessarily meet their expectations:

> "They [service users] have performed really well in the interview, but then they started the role it was not what they expected at all. A lot of it was IT-based, and they were not prepared for the assessments, paperwork, and the sheer volume of caseloads. They also found the lack of face-to-face contact with SUs to be a problem. In short, this was not the role they wanted". (Community Director)

Having been trained to a high standard as peer mentors, offers of employment were sometimes made by organisations dealing with recovery and addiction which could be appealing to service users seeking related paid work. However, one staff member cautioned that these roles may not always be suitable for service users, as the risk of transitioning into this role too soon could be that the focus is shifted towards supporting others and away from their own self-care and recovery. While working as peer mentors, they are offered support to ensure that this balance is maintained, but it was likely that this would not be made available by other organisations.

The question was also raised at one site as to whether, once they have gained transferable skills from SUI work, it may be most beneficial for service users to be encouraged to move away from working within criminal justice and develop a new identity within another profession.

Another challenge linked to service users undertaking roles within probation was that this could lead to them not being perceived by responsible officers as still in need of their support. Staff may incorrectly assume that SUI training could be a substitute for regular supervision appointments. One peer mentor coordinator recalled how staff would sometimes send someone to do the peer mentor training, then say:

> "well they will be with you for five or six months, so by the time they are finished with you, their order has finished". (Peer mentor coordinator)

A specific example of how this could then manifest was where the responsible officer would meet with a service user five minutes before their training session and hold their supervision in those few minutes. This was identified as a problem by the co-ordinator:

> "It's almost like you are using peer mentor training as your supervision session. But this has got nothing to do with supervision. And then you feel that the service user is missing out because they are not getting proper support. I am a little uncomfortable with that". (Peer mentor coordinator)

There was a danger that service users could miss out on essential supervision, with the nature of SUI support being very different from that which should be provided in their standard supervision appointments. As such, this is another boundary which needs to be recognised and maintained.

2.3.4 Challenge of investment

While productive SUI work was being undertaken by committed individuals, it was often with very little resource, restricting the potential impact. Limited time to dedicate to the work was seen as particularly problematic, with many staff stating that they were fitting in the SUI work alongside their day job and that they were already overworked. Nevertheless, they were dedicated to SUI because they held a strong belief in its value. A further challenge arose if these staff moved into different roles, as it was not always clear who would continue the work.

Alongside time pressures, a lack of finances was a barrier to progressing SUI activity. Time and again, we heard that there was little or no budget available for this work. Difficulties were experienced in being able to repay volunteer expenses, and we saw examples where staff were paying for these out of their own pocket, or holding fundraising activities to be able to cover these costs. On other occasions, volunteers had to wait for quite considerable amounts of time to get reimbursed, which was especially problematic for those not in paid employment.

One peer mentor coordinator spoke about the impact this had for their volunteers and how it can affect SUI work, potentially undermining them in giving the sufficient support required by service users to remain in the role:

> *"When someone moves over to us for the training, we are supporting them. It's not just a one-off training session, its ongoing. Counsellor. Support. Confident. You name it. So when we can't do the basics like cover them for their travel expenses, that has a knock-on effect to their motivation. As soon as they are demotivated we have got a bigger job to do to re-motivate them, or to help them to start to self-motivate before they are gone".* (Peer mentor coordinator)

More issues emerged around expenses when staff were trying to organise a forum for previous service users. Many were unable to afford the travel costs, so ideally, they needed to receive the funds in advance. However, since they were no longer in the probation system, this was not deemed possible. Subsequently, although the forum was organised, there were no attendees.

2.3.5 Barriers to implementation and improvement

It was noted that staff would always have to consider if proposals were feasible and whether financial or time resources were available for implementation. Specific examples were seen where SUI proposals were not able to be actioned. For example, at one site, a request had been made for cups to be available in the reception area for those waiting for appointments to have a drink of water. However, an explanation was provided as to why this could not be facilitated:

> *"The guys wanted to have water in reception. There was a guy the other day just drinking water out of the tap with his hands because they won't give him a cup. So we took that, and asked, but they are not going to provide them with cups. It's an NPS/CRC group [they share a waiting area], and they've said they won't do it because no one wants to pay for them, that's essentially it".* (User Voice staff member)

In some locations, flat screen televisions were available in the reception areas and were used to communicate SUI activity and outcomes. However, at other sites these could not be

provided despite a request from service users, as the funds were not available. A proposal had also been submitted for people to have their travelling expenses reimbursed for attending appointments, but this too had to be turned down as it was not financially viable:

> *"I know people are struggling, but I had to say 'We can't do that. This is our policy. This is how much money we've got behind it. I can't spend any more than that on this without spending less on something else'. So, it's not always a smooth ride through. Sometimes it is a bit of a hard stop".* (CRC Director)

Another proposal which was raised but could not be actioned was for probation offices to be open at the weekend to allow those service users in full-time employment to attend appointments without this disrupting their work. While it was accepted that in theory this would be desirable, it was not practical to get staff to commit to weekend hours.

When asked about the extent to which proposals were successfully implemented, at one site the following estimate was given:

> *"Probably about 30 per cent of the cases kind of morph into a different proposal because what's proposed is not doable".* (CRC Director)

While the above-mentioned proposals were not deemed to be viable, in some instances, SUI work could be setting the bar too low, with proposals needing to present more challenge. A director at one site noted that if he finds himself immediately agreeing to most council proposals, then they are probably not asking for enough. This was largely linked to the relatively early stages of development for the SUI work, with improvements occurring as the process became more established:

> *"The councils haven't necessarily pushed as hard as they can yet. The proposals are getting better and bigger, but it gets to the point where they'll be pushed and tested a lot more and that sort of happens naturally as the council gets a bit more mature. Then you start looking at deeper things other than just appointments and things".* (User Voice staff member)

> *"As these guys are getting more mature in terms of their time with us, the quality of the proposals are starting to lift".* (User Voice staff member)

Having a third-party organisation who specialised in SUI work involved in the process within the CRCs was seen to be beneficial, as they could play a role to facilitate the generation of increased 'challenge'.

2.4   Benefits highlighted by service users

It was very apparent that service users viewed taking part in SUI as extremely beneficial, both in terms of the impact it had at a personal level, as well as the influence it could have for others. Linked to the voluntary nature of the role, those involved were clearly motivated and believed in its worth:

> *"It's not just like we're just doing it because it's got to be done, it's something we're passionate about".* (Service user council representative)

Figure 5: Benefits highlighted by service users

2.4.1 Self-efficacy

SUI involvement required a degree of personal commitment, which, dependent on the role, could be quite considerable. However, this investment resulted in a number of benefits for service users at an individual level, including increased self-esteem and a belief in their ability to make a difference and succeed.

Having experience of being in the criminal justice system, many service users spoke about the impact on their self-esteem and sense of worth, particularly due to the potential stigma of being labelled as an offender. Being given a position of responsibility as part of their SUI work was an opportunity for them to identify and capitalise on their strengths, rather than focusing on the less positive aspects of their past:

> *"Because you feel like dirt, basically, and then you come into something like this and they're making you feel important, making you feel like you can do something, it all impacts on your mental health and it's good".* (Service user council representative)

> *"It [SUI work] is a start in recognising what your worth is….it gives you that motivation through, you know, 'I can do more', it's like I can do what they, what it always said on the tin I couldn't do, or I thought I couldn't do, you know, I can do that. I can do what they want and break those barriers down".* (Service user council representative)

Another service user recalled how she had left school unable to read and write, but was now studying for qualifications. This gave her a huge sense of pride where she had previously felt shame, stating *"I was never proud of myself, but I am proud of myself now"*.

Participants also spoke about how they had become more self-assured through their SUI work. One service user recalled that she was now willing to speak about her past when taking group sessions, stating:

> *"I've got the confidence to say 'look, this is me and this is my situation"*. (Peer Mentor)

This was further boosted by the fact that she was selected to undertake an NVQ qualification as part of this work, helping her to realise her potential. This theme also emerged for another participant active in SUI:

> *"I never had the opportunity to realise my potential earlier. Now that's what it's [SUI] given us. I ain't got a silver spoon, I've got a broken wooden one. But at least now it's given me the chance to fix it"*. (Peer mentor)

2.4.2 Social benefits

Alongside self-efficacy, the desistance literature highlights the importance of positive networks of support (McNeill and Weaver, 2010) and it was apparent from the ease of communication between service users in SUI roles that they tended to have close social bonds with each other. They also spoke explicitly about how their SUI opportunities had provided them with increased stability and a sense of belonging, and that the friendships and support network which they had developed were, at times, vital for continuing to participate:

> *"So, the support that I get, where I speak to these guys every single week, and they do motivate me to get up and come out and do these things, and I don't think without the support from these two [SUI members] that I would still be part of this. Maybe if it'd been someone else that I'd met I might feel differently about it. But because I've got them, it's like my support group".* (Service user council representative)

Having the shared experience of being in the criminal justice system was one reason why service users felt especially comfortable with each other. They recalled a sense of relief from being with people who they felt would not judge them, in contrast to negative reactions they had received, or anticipated receiving, from some of those without an offending background:

> *"It means a lot to like actually feel like you belong somewhere, because certainly when you've had a conviction, or I've had a lot in my life anyway, if you don't feel like you belong somewhere or you're important to someone, then it makes things a lot harder. So it feels like you've got sort of people around you that have been in similar situations and, yes, it's just a positive thing, I think".* (Service user council representative)

SUI work could also provide a motivation for individuals to be more sociable, even when this was previously found to be challenging. One service user spoke about how he had always found it very difficult to be involved in social activities. However, because he was now invested in this role, he felt a *"compulsion"* to attend and to interact with others, which he reported as a positive experience.

2.4.3 Professional development

Having a criminal record can be a barrier to gaining paid or even voluntary work, and one of the key aspects of SUI raised frequently by participants was that it could provide professional skills which could ultimately lead to employment. SUI opportunities could be vital in developing skills transferable to a wider number of roles, and the time and energy which they were giving to the SUI work provided evidence of both their capabilities, and their hard-working, committed attitudes.

The skills gained from SUI work included taking part in council meetings, presenting proposals to the CEOs of the CRCs, gathering the views of service users in 'surgeries', and taking part in focus groups or forums. Those who had been trained and were volunteering as peer mentors also had a wide variety of skills which allowed them to support other service users in rebuilding their lives. It could also help to account for periods of time spent not working. As one participant explained:

> *"As much as I have been out of work, I have been volunteering, and that, sort of rather than going to an employer with a year and a half of doing nothing, being off sick, I've got a year and a half of suffering with an illness but also building myself back up to where I need to be for when I am fit for work".* (Service user council representative)

Becoming more comfortable in a professional environment and learning the ways in which to communicate with colleagues were seen as attributes which could be gained through SUI work, with one participant stating, *"it gives me more confidence to work my words right"*. This sentiment was echoed by another participant, who likewise felt that he was now more at ease within the workplace, and able to regain some of his old identity:

> *"I feel like a professional when we come to these meetings and it gives you a bit more of your old self back, but it's also opening doors for the future. Whereas I was in limbo for a little while thinking I am never going to be able to have a professional job again, and I'm just going to end up doing this or reoffending, but because of this I've sort of come out of my sentence and it's not".* (Service user council representative)

Training is often provided for those who take part in SUI roles, although the extent of this was found to vary considerably across organisations and locations, and according to the nature of the work. For example, those who attended service user councils received support and guidance as they went through the process. Yet for peer mentors, the training was much more intense, preparing them to work in supporting other service users through their desistance journey.

For many, getting an unrelated and potentially unfulfilling job for the sake of receiving a wage was not a desirable option at present. Positively, at some sites, there was a pathway through volunteering where additional roles and responsibilities were incrementally given and which could potentially lead to paid employment within probation.[11] There were also opportunities to gain qualifications, such as NVQs or other accreditations from academic institutions. Many of the participants expressed a clear wish to move from unpaid voluntary

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[11] In our recent inspection report for Kent, Surrey and Sussex CRC (HMI Probation, 2019b), we recognised the progress that had been made in relation to the delivery of unpaid work, stating as follows: 'Most impressive is that individuals previously subject to unpaid work now make up 14 per cent of the supervisor workforce, an approach that reflects the CRC's commitment to rehabilitation'.

work into a paid role, and they hoped that this would be within an area which allowed them to utilise their experience and ability to connect with and support other people.

2.4.4 Supporting desistance

SUI could play a significant role in helping participants to desist from crime. This was due, in part, to the benefits already noted above, but also because the SUI work assisted them in developing a new, non-criminal identity (McNeill and Weaver, 2010). To support other people with their rehabilitation, and especially for peer mentors, it was necessary for those doing SUI to be living crime-free lives. The responsibilities and benefits which they were gaining from SUI gave them motivation to ensure that this was not jeopardised by returning to criminal activity:

> *"I was conscious, 'don't do anything stupid'. And it was so tempting. But coming here that one day a week… It held me into such a spark of positivity it is unreal".* (Peer Mentor)

> *"I can't ever see myself reoffending again, and I'd say that is mainly because of SUI, because I think without it I don't know where I would be two years down the line".* (Service user council representative)

SUI roles could also support desistance through providing a meaningful way to occupy time with activities which were positive, rather than those which may be less desirable. This was summed up by one service user who said:

> *"It's [SUI] certainly helped me, made me more aware and given me a lot of things to do when, otherwise, I'd probably be up to more nefarious kind of things".* (Service user council representative)

It could also support mental health and recovery from addiction by providing a positive focus which, as one service user noted *"catches you from dropping too low"*. This is turn could be instrumental in supporting desistance.

2.4.5 Supporting other service users

Alongside the personal benefits they experienced, service users emphasised that they were committed to SUI due to the potential positive impact for others. They placed great value on being able to use their own experiences to support other service users who were facing challenges and to guide them in a more positive direction. Having also had experience of the criminal justice system, as well as challenges throughout their lives, they felt able to both empathise with others and advise:

> *"I would like to help in all the issues we do discuss. I would like to kind of implement that, and use my own experiences to help other people as well".* (Service user council representative)

They frequently reported that other service users were at times more comfortable opening up to them than to staff members:

> *"It's different for a service user to approach a responsible officer than it is us. They open up to us straight away".* (Service user council representative)

> *"And that's what a lot of people think. No disrespect. If you haven't been in trouble, you don't know. We've been there. We feel that pain".* (Peer Mentor)

The ability to get service users to engage and discuss their issues was seen as a great moment for those doing SUI work. As they recalled these occasions, the pride and satisfaction was evident:

> *"For example, one guy who I thought wouldn't engage, he was just in the corner, he wasn't listening. But slowly and surely, he turns around. He's sitting there and after a while he's saying, 'be quiet, I want to hear".* (Peer Mentor)

> *"Because that's massive progress, isn't it? If you've got a man sitting there, session after session…. doesn't want to communicate and then when they start that's massive".* (Peer Mentor)

Having their own experience of challenging life circumstances could help in recognising issues which could in turn help them to make connections with service users.

> *"Some of the women's groups that I have been in, my past experience, what I've gone through myself, I have picked up in them. And we've gone through and supported them. The relief on their faces and knowing they aren't on their own".* (Peer Mentor)

Good practice example

In Staffordshire and West Midlands CRC, a service user co-designed and led intervention called 'Transition and Hope' had been developed. This two-hour session, led by peer mentors with support from CRC staff, focused on the personal journey of the peer mentors through the criminal justice system, and the strategies and decisions they had made to support their desistance. It was felt that service users could both relate to and engage with the peer mentors and their stories. By hearing their positive examples, service users could gain a belief that positive change was possible, as well as being realistic and prepared for the potential challenges ahead. Throughout the sessions, mentors challenged the attitudes of service users when required, using their own lived experience, with service users appearing willing to accept challenges from those who had experienced them in the past.

Another way in which SUI participants felt able to use their experience with other service users was to try to encourage them to engage positively with the probation process. Peer mentors noted how a lot of the comments received from service users in the waiting area regarding their supervision were negative, but that part of their role was to re-motivate them:

> *"They give me a load about what's negative, because they don't want to be there, they don't want to be engaged. There's nothing probation can offer me. But I say to the lads, 'Well try this', 'think of this', so that's just it gives them a different way of thinking, and it can make – hopefully get them so 'you've got to do it, so you may as well make it enjoyable, get something from it'".* (Service user council representative)

> *"And you sit down and ask them the questions on our form, and one of the questions is 'what do you find positive about being on licence or using probation?' And most people will turn around and say 'nothing'. And then I will turn around and say 'well look, I'm a service user myself. I'm on probation. And it's better to be out than in'".* (Service user council representative)

Being able to act as a role model to other service users who were not as far along their desistance journey was a further positive way in which SUI participants could have an impact on others:

> *"And they know, right, ok, there is someone from the other side and it just gives them that little glimmer. You know. And it's great. And if you were in yesterday's group and it went over by half an hour. They were happy just chatting away. Most of the time they just want to get out".* (Peer Mentor)

> *"Some engage straight away cos they hear a little bit and think 'but he's right, the need for change. Why am I letting myself be dragged on the street?' And then you get the other time when it's over a few weeks and it's like...you know...and they come back and say 'I've got a job now, I've got my missus back, and I can see my kids".* (Peer Mentor)

In relation to being a role model or inspiration, a number of the peer mentors felt that being older than other service users, with greater life experience, could be beneficial:

> *"I work with a lot of the guys and the young men on the weekends. For me, it brings another quality, like a father quality and you can see them looking up and listening to you. 'What you saying, old man?'. 'I'll tell ya. If you want to listen I will tell you'".* (Peer Mentor)

> *"It also helps with the different age groups with the peer mentoring. Because some people, no disrespect, they relate to me being an old woman, than Lisa [another peer mentor] being young. That's' the way it is. And I get that with some of the old men. They listen to me more than they listen to Lisa".* (Peer Mentor)

2.4.6 Changes to service delivery

One of the main SUI benefits highlighted by staff was the improvements which service users could suggest to the delivery of probation services. This was also an important factor for some service users, although it did not come across as strongly as the themes set out above.

Participants valued being able to work alongside probation practitioners and managers as it gave them a constructive way to emphasise issues which they had experienced, as well as those raised by other service users. Working within the criminal justice system could also be significant at a personal level, especially when viewed in contrast to earlier, less positive experiences:

> *"It's, I suppose, it's coming from being around User Voice and probation, rather than fighting the system from the outside, and hoping I can help change the system from the inside, and that's a really good mind-shift really, compared to where I was".* (Service user council representative)

Part of the reason why SUI work could be so rewarding was the potential for genuine change. There was a feeling of optimism about the process, and this was a great driver for continuing the work:

> *"It's nice to know that we're making a difference by asking the service users, by bringing it to probation and then seeing the action – win, win, win".* (Service user council representative)

"It looks like I will see progress in the three years that I'm going to be there through User Voice, through the CRC, working together, working with the service users, giving them a voice to be able to speak to them". (Service user council representative)

It was evident that the desire to make organisational changes was often driven by the aspiration to make the system better for other people.

"The engagement that I get from that [SUI] is fantastic because there is that possibility of change, of having an influence on that change to help the people on probation to make that service better". (Service user council representative)

As also noted by staff, having a third-party organisation involved in supporting these changes was considered by service users to be an important part of the process. The fact that the CRCs were working alongside another organisation was seen to show that they took the process seriously, and that they were prepared to be held accountable:

"The fact that it [User Voice] is a private company and it wants to make its services better. So the CRC is using User Voice to get, to make sure that it doesn't fall into a malaise, and that's good to see". (Service user council representative)

2.5 Challenges highlighted by service users

All the service users involved in SUI work very much valued the opportunity and spoke about it as a positive aspect of their lives. However, there were also some challenges associated with their involvement.

Figure 6: Challenges highlighted by service users
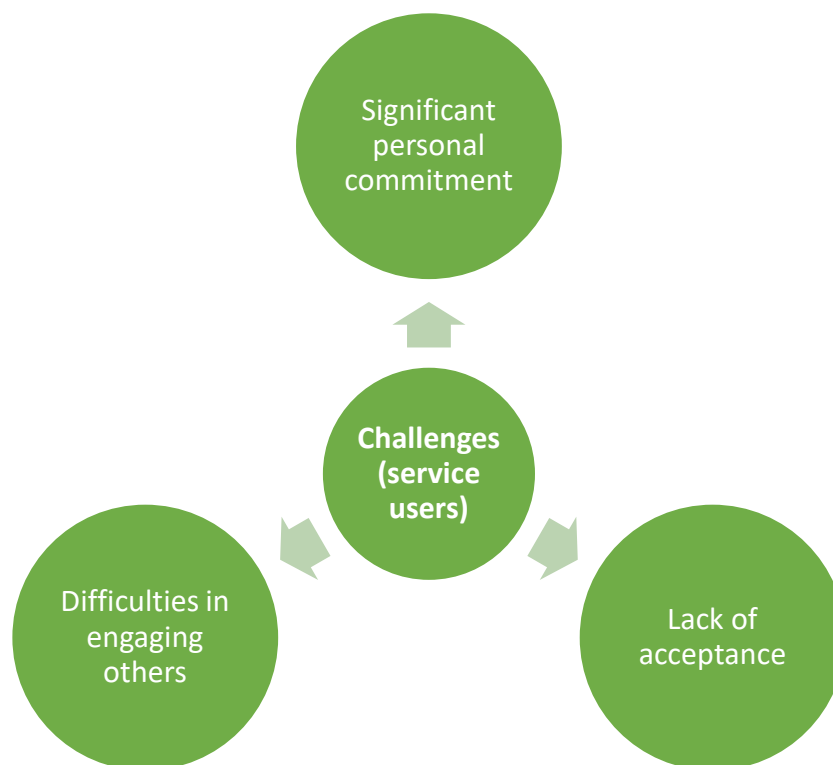
2.5.1 Significant personal commitment

It was apparent from speaking to a group of peer mentors that this role could require a significant personal commitment. The dedication started during the training phase, with one participant speaking with emotion about the enormity of the process. Nevertheless, she saw it through to the end as she was committed to supporting both herself and other service users:

> *"I was begging to go on the peer mentoring course, and I did it and I found it very, very, deep – it really makes you soul-search and most times I spent crying every session, or I didn't want to go. But I turned up every single time. I was only one of three that actually turned up every single session but that was really hard for me".* (Peer Mentor)

Post-training, the intensity continued. Due to the skills they now possessed and the benefits they could bring, peer mentors were in high demand. This was shown by one of the participants who, when talking about the group sessions she was co-facilitating, recalled:

> *"yesterday I did a group, I'm doing two groups tomorrow, but I don't know how I'm going to do it. I need to rush from one to the other in half an hour".* (Peer Mentor)

While this peer mentor clearly valued the fact that her skills and abilities were needed, the potential for burnout was apparent. Indeed, when reviewing experiences of intense working with our peer researchers, they were keen to stress the need to recognise that many service users involved in this work were in recovery themselves, and that it was essential that a balance was achieved between gaining the benefits from SUI, but not doing this at the expense of their own self-care.

SUI work is voluntary, but can take up a considerable amount of time and energy and, for some, it meant that it was not possible to do paid work at the same time. This could create challenges in relation to supporting themselves and their families financially:

> *"I had the job centre on my back, and it was like I wanted to do this job but there wasn't any like jobs open – but I was doing the peer mentoring. And then you are juggling. You are getting all the stress from the job centre. Where they could sanction your money. But you have a passion to do something, but you need to do the training. I was travelling for the training. The train fares and I didn't have the money to do that. And coming here and doing what I'm doing, like with the peer mentoring volunteering – you are doing the volunteering but you still have got a life to run. You've got to pay bills".* (Peer Mentor)

> *"There were times when I was like: how am I going to feed them [family]? What am I going to do here? Because I wasn't getting any money for them – no tax credits, just my little ESA and any little work I could get".* (Peer Mentor)

There was a degree of acceptance among service users that they would not be paid for their work, although one peer mentor said that any payment would be "*the icing on the cake*". Participants did note, however, that they felt slightly aggrieved at the lack of recognition:

> *"I have been coming here for like three years. Why can't it be valued in another sense? You can do a degree in three years".* (Peer Mentor)

Another felt that when even small requests were not accepted, like receiving a token value gift voucher as a recognition of successfully completing their intensive peer mentoring training, it could be a little disheartening, especially when they had arranged the training

around childcare, and possibly turned down paid work to honour the commitment. There is a further link here to the desistance literature which highlights the importance of recognising and celebrating/rewarding progress (McNeill and Weaver, 2010).

2.5.2 Lack of acceptance

Another challenge identified by the service users was that even though they were performing legitimate and important work for the probation service, some paid staff members appeared to have difficulties accepting their roles:

> *"We were in a probation office a couple of weeks ago and they wouldn't let us out the back even though we had our badges, we'd introduced ourselves, we had a room booked. They said this is because we were offenders. I had to correct them and said: 'Actually, we're operational partners. I'm not an offender'".* (Service user council representative)

> *"We were at the probation offices and when I asked to go to the toilet they said: 'Well, I suppose we can trust you boys'. I mean I felt really done up when she said that to me".* (Service user council representative)

It should be noted that when discussing these examples with our peer researchers, it was highlighted that although they themselves had witnessed similar occurrences between staff and service users, this could result from a lack of clarity or miscommunication, rather than staff being deliberately confrontational or unaccepting of service users. Nevertheless, it was recognised that the service users' perceptions were always important, particularly when the interpretation was a lack of acceptance from staff.

Hopes were expressed that any negative views and attitudes would improve over time:

> *"I think in time, once they've found out more and more what the benefits are of any of the case managers' service users to get involved with, they've seen a better outcome and I think – but, again, everything takes time; it doesn't happen overnight".* (Service user council representative)

One former peer mentor, who went on to become a paid member of CRC staff, reflected that as she had come into the role via this route, everyone knew her background and consequently had a degree of wariness towards her:

> *"The difference with peer mentors, who then go through a transition and end up working, is that everyone knows that to be a peer mentor for the CRC, you must have been someone whose been on the wrong side of the law. So that label is always there. So that's the big difference. The fact that it's quite overt, that's where the fear factor comes in".* (Peer Mentor/Community Support Worker)

The fear felt by some staff was further considered by another SUI rep who recalled that when he first started with this work:

> *"there was a big fear about 'Why are these ex-offenders coming in here kind of telling us what to do?'".* (Service User Rep)

However, he took the time to speak to staff, clarifying what the role entailed and its purpose:

"I'm going: 'That's your thing, we're not here to tell you what to do'. We're here just to find some particular issues on particular research on what's working and what's not working, and how we can make a benefit, for a benefit to the service user, but not only to benefit the service user but to benefit staff as well. The whole point is staff as well, not just – it's not a one-way street". (Service user council representative)

In response to the challenges they had faced, participants spoke about how they had remained resilient and had not been defeated by negative attitudes. The volunteer who had become a paid member of staff said that she felt that

"every single day I come into this office I know I have to prove myself". (Peer Mentor/Community Support Worker)

For the participants who had been challenged about room access, again a stoic response was given to the staff member:

"I'm not defined by the fact that I offended 10 years ago. And I really put her on the spot. But that's part of what we do [in SUI]: that challenge". (Service user council representative)

2.5.3 Difficulties in engaging others

A final challenge raised by service users was the barriers they could face when trying to engage other service users – with some stating that this was the main difficulty they faced. Whereas they could see the merit in raising issues and looking for solutions, from their experience, not all appreciated this or wanted to contribute:

"It's not the case of, like, everyone that you approach is going to openly be quite happy to talk". (Service user council representative)

"I suppose people's innate reluctance to talk to someone who they don't know about personal matters". (Service user council representative)

However, one peer noted that because of the training he had received, it would not deflate him; he perceived it as a challenge to overcome:

"It's not a barrier, that's their choice. And because of the level of training we are getting, I don't look at anything as a barrier. If someone doesn't want to answer one week, doesn't want to engage with us, well in three weeks' time when we see them again and we ask them, they might want to talk to us". (Peer Mentor)

There was also the belief that even if they were not prepared to talk at that time, the message was still getting through:[12]

"Yeah, you get them all the time. You always get someone who doesn't want to engage. But even saying that, you know, when you watch them, it's going in". (Peer Mentor)

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[12] Such views align to the findings from Farrall et al. (2014) that desistance can be a very long-term process, with service users reflecting at a later point in time.

3. Conclusion

Staff and service users identified a number of benefits and challenges with delivering SUI activities across probation services. While probation providers were committed to actively working with service users to improve services and interventions, including ensuring it was a core part of probation operating models, the continuing challenges could prevent SUI from achieving its full potential.

Taking into consideration the benefits and challenges of SUI from the perspective of both staff and service users, we have identified the following key enablers to effective delivery of SUI:

- Continuing open discussions at senior levels in probation and with third-sector providers working on SUI should take place so that there is clear strategic direction, with the complementary value of 'lived' and 'learned' experience being highlighted.

- Clear guidance is required in relation to inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation, the boundaries of SUI work, reward and remuneration, and potential opportunities for employment.

- The welfare of service users involved in this work should be held as a priority at all times. Care should be taken in achieving the correct balance between utilising their skills and experience to support others, whilst recognising that many are still undergoing their own recovery journeys.

- Communication of SUI activity should happen on a regular and consistent basis across organisations. This would help staff to become more familiar with this work and make them aware of the potential benefits.

- Honest, open dialogue about SUI should be encouraged, where staff can ask questions, seek clarification, and raise concerns. This could play a vital role in reducing any underlying fears and tensions.

- Dedicated funding should be made available to facilitate the smooth operation of the SUI work that committed staff are working hard to support. This would be a way of emphasising the commitment and value which organisations place upon SUI work. In particular, agreement and processes should be in place for reimbursing service users for travelling expenses.

- Dedicated posts should be created for staff to work on SUI activities, and to allow it to become more fully embedded within probation culture and practice. Too many examples have been seen in this research of stretched staff undertaking this work alongside their day-to-day roles.

- Providers should make more use of existing toolkits (e.g. those designed by the Revolving Doors Agency, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c) and practice guides (Weaver, Lightowler and Moodie, 2019) to help support staff and ensure appropriate processes are in place. The HMPPS Standards of Excellence for SUI and the associated toolkit is a valuable benchmark for organisations.

Transforming Rehabilitation appeared to have undermined much of the SUI work taking place prior to its implementation, and this work is only now beginning to re-establish itself. Bearing in mind that the delivery of probation services is to undergo further change, it is essential that the valuable work currently taking place is not disrupted or lost.

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Annex A: Methodology

The research project was initially informed by an examination of existing literature on service user involvement, engagement, and participation within probation and related professions. A significant proportion of the available literature related to healthcare approaches to SUI, in particular, co-production and personalisation of the delivery of services. Limited evidence and literature was available which focused on probation or other criminal justice settings.

The literature review was not a systematic or rapid evidence review, but aimed to provide a brief overview of SUI as background for the research, and to consider whether there had been any developments since *Transforming Rehabilitation*.

Research stages

There were two main stages to the project.

1) Survey

A survey was issued to all CRCs and NPS divisions to gain an understanding of the degree of SUI currently taking place across probation providers. The survey was sent to providers using an online tool, SurveyGizmo, via contacts held within HMI Probation. To boost the response rate and ensure a broad range of knowledge was gained, respondents were followed up at different intervals.

The questions asked were largely open-ended, allowing respondents to provide details regarding their SUI work.

2) Case studies

Based on the survey results, the research team selected which sites to visit to gather further views and experiences of how providers are approaching SUI. These sites were agreed with the Inspectorates' inspection teams so as not to place an undue burden on CRCs or NPS divisions. The research team visited three CRCs, and due to some of the ad hoc and developing work within NPS divisions, visited one NPS division and had telephone interviews with two further NPS divisions.

Some inclusion criteria were initially applied, including the level of SUI – to include sites which had a range of pre-existing SUI and sites where little was currently occurring. Other criteria were initially drawn up in the project scoping, including size and type – to include sites within large metropolitan areas versus smaller locations; and the type of service user, for example, based on gender or ethnic background of service users. However, due to the relatively small-scale nature of the project and survey responses received from sites, it was not possible to be overly selective regarding the chosen study locations.

Within the case study approach, we interviewed both practitioners and service users to gain a more detailed understanding of SUI from both perspectives. This included conducting focus groups with staff and service users directly working on SUI (see Annex B for prompt questions for the interviews/focus groups). We interviewed 17 service users and 23 members of probation staff. The main members of staff involved in the research were Heads of Service Delivery/Operations, Heads of Service User engagement, responsible officers, CRC directors, and peer mentor coordinators.

Finally, we also took observation notes from service user councils across three different sites.

Lived experience peer researchers

The research team were also able to benefit from the Revolving Doors Agency lived experience peer research team. The peer researchers assisted with the research scoping and the fieldwork, and we held a co-production session to code and sense check the findings. The benefits of using peer research are widely noted (Revolving Doors Agency, 2016c).

Analysis

The information collected through the focus groups and interviews were thematically analysed. Following transcription, the two researchers working on the project coded the transcripts separately before meeting to discuss main codes and sub themes.

Limitations

The SUI activities most commonly seen during this research were service user councils and peer mentoring; therefore, the findings link heavily to these two types of SUI. It was not possible to talk in detail with staff who were involved in the co-production of interventions and services with service users. While we were aware of some co-production activities, they did not occur as frequently as the service user councils or peer mentoring.

The focus groups with service users all took place within CRCs; the timing of the research and initial difficulties gaining access to talk to staff in NPS divisions meant that it was not possible to speak to their service users. It is possible that NPS service users may have had different experiences to those highlighted in this report.

Finally, as part of our work with peer researchers, it was recommended that we should talk to both staff and service users who were not undertaking SUI, to examine further the reasons why this was the case. While we agreed that this would add value to the project, the time and resource constraints meant that this was not possible. It would, however, be a worthwhile focus for future research.

Annex B: Prompt questions for focus groups/interviews

Final questions

Key messages coming from SUs? What elements of SUI could be improved? Any plans for development?

Anything else?

Background

How long? Why start? Training/advice. Understanding. Wider connections. Responsibility. Designated time?

Wider staff
Involvement/knowledge/understanding/responsibilities /engagement /training

Types of SUI

Details of different types involved with. What has worked well? What not so well? Anything else in future?

SUI Process

Who recruits SUIs? How well does this work? Challenges? Any guidelines of who to recruit? 'Hard-to-reach?' How do you know people are ready?

Third party involvement

Do you work with a third party i.e. User Voice. Why involve them? Benefits? Challenges? Long-term arrangement?

Staff

Working with SUs

Sorts of changes achieved? Managing expectations? Training for SUs. Strengths and weakness of this?

Perceived challenges

Main challenges to SUI? Examples and how overcome

Changes from SUI

What has changed/improved from SUI? Do you measure/record change? Feeding back to SUs. Feeding back to organisation.

Benefits

Main benefits of SUI? Any approaches better? What do you hope to achieve? Examples of good SUI

Background

Tell me a bit about yourself?

Understanding of SUI? Any other terms – e.g. lived experience

Involvement

How involved – what type of SUI? Aims-what do you hope to achieve? When did you get involved? How long involved? How you got involved? Why did you get involved? Anything similar previous? Expectations of involvement – what were you told? Anything you particularly wanted to achieve in terms of probation services?

Final questions

Would you like to contribute in any other ways?

Anything else you would like to say about your experience of SUI?

Service users

Perceived benefits – for probation

What do you find positive about being involved? Do you know what has happened as a result of your involvement? What were these? Any other issues raised where no change? Is your involvement well received?

Critical success factors

Is SUI well known amongst (i) staff (ii) other service users? Should it be better known? Should they involve more SU? If so, how do you think they could? What helps SUI work well in probation?

Perceived disadvantages

Any difficulties with involvement? What are they? Could anything have been done/handled differently? Has SUI had any negative impact on you?

Perceived benefits – for you

Has being involved had a positive impact for you? In what ways? If involved in more than one form of SUI – which most beneficial or how each one benefitted?