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You're Not Just a Number

Executive Summary

Dr Natasha Du Rose

Experiences of the Key4Life Programme at HMP Fosse Way

You're Not Just a Number: Executive Summary
Experiences of the Key4Life Programme at HMP Fosse Way

Author
Dr Natasha Du Rose

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CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

The United Kingdom's prison system faces a crisis of capacity, safety, and effectiveness. In July 2024, Lord Chancellor Shabana Mahmood warned that "our prisons are broken... unsafe and catastrophically close to bursting at the seams" and argued that "our prisons today create better criminals, not better citizens." Prisons Minister James Timpson echoed this assessment, stating that "dangerously full prisons lead to more crime and more violence" and are "failing one of their most important functions- cutting crime."

The statistics bear out these warnings. Reoffending rates for those leaving custody are disproportionately high: children released from custody reoffend at 66.1%, compared to 22.2% for those receiving a caution, while adults released from short custodial sentences reoffend at 56.9% (Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board, 2025; Ministry of Justice, 2025b). At an average cost of £51,724 per prison place annually, despite substantial public investment, the system struggles to deliver rehabilitation, manage violence, or prepare individuals for successful reintegration. The result is a revolving door of reoffending that imposes enormous costs on victims, communities, and public services.

Against this backdrop, there is growing recognition that effective rehabilitation requires more than containment. It demands interventions that address the root causes of offending behaviour including disrupted education, fractured family relationships, limited employment prospects, and underdeveloped emotional and social skills. The Key4Life programme at HMP Fosse Way represents one such intervention. It is a relationship-based model combining emotional development, lived experience mentoring, and employer engagement. This research provides rigorous evidence of its impact.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This study was conducted with 46 men who participated in the Key4Life programme. The sample comprised 41 men serving custodial sentences at HMP Fosse Way (15 of whom were Key Mentors) and 5 men living in the community post-release (3 of whom were involved in programme delivery as Key Mentors). This design provided robust evidence by capturing perspectives from men at different stages of engagement with the programme, including those who had successfully reintegrated into the community.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and field observations conducted over an extended period of engagement with the prison and programme participants. Analysis was grounded in desistance theory and prison sociology, drawing on established frameworks from scholars including Maruna, McNeill, Giordano, Farrall, Lieblich, and Crewe. The research examined how participation in Key4Life influenced participants' identities, relationships, behaviour, and future orientation - factors consistently identified as central to the desistance process.

The study's qualitative design prioritised depth over breadth, enabling detailed exploration of participants' lived experiences and the mechanisms through which change occurred. This approach is particularly valuable for understanding complex social interventions where quantitative measures alone cannot capture the nuances of transformation.

KEY FINDINGS: TWELVE INTERCONNECTED OUTCOMES

The research identified twelve interconnected outcomes arising from participation in Key4Life. These are not isolated achievements but mutually reinforcing dimensions of change. Improved emotional resilience reduces violence. A changed mindset enables the adoption of a prosocial identity. Better communication strengthens family relationships. Hope and motivation drive engagement with employment. What emerges is a picture of holistic transformation where individual, relational, and institutional dimensions interact to support desistance.

Individual Transformation: Identity, Relationships, and Emotional Development

The Adoption of a Prosocial Identity

Perhaps the most significant outcome was the emergence of a new prosocial identity: one not defined by crime, survival, or the streets, but by care, authenticity, and responsibility. Through emotional reconnection, changed behaviour, and a supportive peer community, men began to see themselves differently and to imagine lives rooted in positive social roles. Crucially, participants described this not as total reinvention but as reconnection with a truer, earlier self. The programme helped men not simply to perform change but to internalise it.

Yasin described speaking at a Key4Life graduation attended by his family:

"At my last graduation about a month ago, I spoke so confidently. Got up, gave a speech. I think there were over 100 people. My family was there, my partner was there, my brothers were there. They were so impressed; they'd never seen me in that light. They remember me as a 17-year-old coming to prison, being a little rebel, now they're seeing me as a man and standing up being who I want to be... My little brother said to me: 'After all these years, we're proud of you and it's lovely the changes you've made. We look up to you still.' That really resonated. He had a chance to see me in a different light before I come out."

Yasin, Key4Life Mentor

This identity transformation is central to desistance theory and represents a shift from "offender" to "someone who helps others." It is a reframing with profound implications for public safety and social reintegration.

Improved Relationships and Family Stability

Participants commonly described improvements in their relationships with family members, partners, and children. Through structured reflection and encouragement from facilitators and mentors, many men re-evaluated how they had treated loved ones and sought to rebuild trust. The importance of being a better father, son, or partner emerged repeatedly. Several participants described a newfound sense of emotional availability and commitment to maintaining healthy, supportive relationships. This is particularly significant given the strong link between family stability and desistance. Men who repair family relationships are less likely to reoffend and more likely to contribute positively to their communities. They also break intergenerational cycles of offending, instability, and harm.



Improved Emotional Resilience

Many participants developed new tools to manage their emotions more effectively, particularly in high-stress or triggering situations. Through workshops, roleplay sessions, and equine therapy, men learned to identify, process, and articulate their emotions. This increased emotional awareness and control was often described as a turning point. Rather than defaulting to anger, withdrawal, or violence, men began to reflect, pause, and choose more constructive responses. Emotional resilience is foundational: it underpins violence reduction, improves relationships, and enables effective communication. Given the disproportionate prevalence of mental health difficulties among the prison population, interventions that build emotional resilience address a critical gap in custodial provision and contribute to both individual wellbeing and institutional safety.

Reintegration and Desistance: Employment and Communication

Employability Skills and Economic Contribution

The programme placed strong emphasis on preparing participants for employment through CV writing, interview preparation, and direct engagement with employers. For many participants, this was their first exposure to professional working environments. Employers attended the prison to conduct mock interviews, provide business mentoring, and demystify what had once felt unreachable. Participants reported increased optimism about securing work, a clearer understanding of their transferable skills, and greater motivation to pursue legitimate income.

The experience of being seen, heard, and validated by professionals disrupted internalised narratives of exclusion. Kingston described the impact of employer recognition:

"It was generally a morale boost because... you're genuinely trying to sell yourself to these people. And the fact that they said, like, 'Oh, we see something in you,' you don't get that... So, for someone to say, we see something in you, that's powerful... Yeah, no one said that in such a long time. Like, we can see some value in you. Like...it makes you feel like, okay, I have got some kind of purpose on this earth."

Kingston, Key4Life Participant

This directly addresses one of the strongest predictors of desistance: stable employment. By building employability, Key4Life contributes to reduced reoffending, economic participation, and decreased reliance on public services.

Improved Communication Skills

Participants reported that the programme improved their ability to express themselves, listen actively, and navigate conversations with greater confidence and clarity. This was fostered through structured group activities that encouraged dialogue, vulnerability, and respectful listening. These skills translated into better relationships with family, peers, and professionals, including prison staff and potential employers. Improved communication was seen as a cornerstone for conflict resolution, relationship repair, and successful engagement with employment and community services. In policy terms, communication skills are essential for successful resettlement and reintegration.

Institutional Impact: Creating Safer, More Rehabilitative Prisons

An Improved Prison Culture

One of the most striking findings was the collective cultural shift created by Key4Life within HMP Fosse Way. As participants developed new ways of thinking and behaving, others on the wing took notice. Men described how their changed attitudes created a ripple effect, fostering a more positive, reflective, and emotionally open environment. Prison officers responded to the calmer, more constructive atmosphere by treating participants differently. The presence of Key4Life contributed to a broader shift in prison culture that challenged negative norms, reduced tension, and made it safer for men to be vulnerable and emotionally expressive. This cultural transformation has significant implications for prison management, staff safety, and the reduction of violence.

Improved Behaviour and Reduced Violence

Participants reported becoming less confrontational, more patient, and better able to manage conflict without resorting to aggression. Men who had previously reacted with anger or violence described adopting more composed, reflective responses. Some lifers and mentors observed tangible changes in wing behaviour, attributing a calmer atmosphere directly to the influence of the Key4Life cohort. This shift was consistently linked to increased emotional intelligence and empathy. One participant, Vincent, described a transformative moment immediately following a Key4Life session:

"I had an altercation with someone after the session, actually. We was arguing, arguing, arguing. My first instinct would be to say, 'Yo, step in the pad and let's scrap'... but I seen that they didn't want to. So, I was like 'Alright then cool', told everyone to go, and then me and him was just chatting. I said, 'All right, cool. Look, my bad, I shouldn't have spoke to you like that.' Then he said, 'I understand, this, that and the other' and then we just shook hands after that."

Vincent, Key4Life Participant

The reduction in violence and improved conflict management delivers clear benefits for prison safety, staff wellbeing, and the creation of environments where rehabilitation (not merely containment) can take place.

Mentoring Skills and Giving Back: A Self-Sustaining Model

Several participants who had previously completed the programme returned as mentors, describing how this deepened their own transformation while allowing them to support others. Acting as mentors fostered a sense of responsibility, reinforced personal change, and cultivated leadership qualities. The opportunity to give back was described as healing. Yasin, a Key Mentor, explained:

"The day you get sentenced, it breaks you as a person. You're never the same person ever again. After years of pain and darkness, there comes a time when you reflect, and you realize something: the only way to mend that broken part of you is by helping others, one person at a time. Every single person that you help, you're healing yourself. That's what drives us as mentors - helping others helps you become that whole person again."

Yasin, Key4Life Mentor

This creates a self-sustaining model where programme graduates support future cohorts, embedding positive change within the institution itself without escalating costs.

Enabling Mechanisms: Psychological Foundations of Change

Four additional psychological outcomes function as enabling mechanisms that underpin the outcomes described above: changed mindset, hope for the future, increased confidence, and motivation and purpose. These represent internal shifts in how participants understood themselves, their potential, and their relationship to the future.

A changed mindset (moving from fatalism and defensiveness to openness and possibility) created the internal conditions for behavioural change to take root. Without this cognitive shift, interventions often produce compliance rather than transformation. Hope for the future provided a motivational resource that sustained effort and persistence, helping men invest in the difficult work of change. Increased confidence, fostered through challenges such as public speaking and employer engagement, enabled participants to navigate the transition from prison to community. Motivation and purpose, often tied to specific goals such as supporting children or starting a business, provided direction and meaning.

These mechanisms are not policy outcomes in themselves, but they are critical to understanding how and why Key4Life succeeds where other interventions fail. They represent the psychological groundwork that makes lasting transformation possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION

At a time when reoffending costs the taxpayer an estimated £18 billion annually and prison safety remains a critical concern, the evidence consistently points to the value of relational, lived experience-led rehabilitation approaches. The Justice Data Lab has now evaluated over 250 rehabilitation programmes, with a small but significant number demonstrating statistically significant reductions in reoffending. Programmes such as Key4Life, which integrate lived experience mentoring, cultural relevance, emotional rehabilitation, and employer engagement, address multiple policy objectives simultaneously and represent a compelling case for strategic investment.

The evidence presented in this research supports four priority recommendations for scaling the impact of relational, lived experience-based rehabilitation programmes such as Key4Life across the criminal justice system. While this qualitative study provides rich evidence of participant experience and perceived benefit, it does not allow causal conclusions about system-level effectiveness. These recommendations should therefore be read in conjunction with the call for longitudinal evaluation detailed in the full report.

1. Commission National Expansion of Relational Rehabilitation Programmes Across the Prison Estate

HMPPS has taken positive steps to support third sector rehabilitation through the Rehabilitation Grants Scheme 2026-2029, providing grants of up to £150,000 per year for evidence-based projects across prisons and probation. This is a welcome foundation, but scaling up this investment is now essential if proven relational rehabilitation programmes are to reach the prisoners who need them most.

The Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service may wish to consider building on the existing grants framework by establishing a dedicated multi-year funding stream for relational, lived experience-based programmes with an independently verified evidence base, such as those assessed through the Justice Data Lab. Such programmes directly align with ministerial priorities to reduce reoffending, improve prison safety, and enhance rehabilitation outcomes. Their model, combining emotional development, cultural credibility, structured mentoring by individuals with lived experience, and employer partnerships, offers a scalable intervention that addresses the root causes of offending behaviour.

The Government could usefully consider recognising such programmes within the national rehabilitation strategy as core interventions for young men at high risk of reoffending, with funding allocated through the next Spending Review to support delivery in at least 15 additional establishments by 2029-30, beginning with a pilot expansion in the 2027-28 financial year.

Immediate action: The MoJ may wish to commission a costed expansion plan and identify priority establishments for rollout by the end of the 2026-27 financial year, prioritising Young Offender Institutions and Category C training prisons with high concentrations of young adult men serving sentences of 12 months or more.

2. Strengthen and Scale the Existing Employer Engagement Infrastructure

Significant progress has already been made in supporting prison leavers into employment through the New Futures Network, Employment Advisory Boards, Employment Hubs, and the Going Forward into Employment Civil Service scheme. These initiatives, many developed under the leadership of Prisons Minister James Timpson, represent a strong foundation. However, employer engagement remains inconsistent and the structural incentives needed to drive wider private sector participation are not yet in place.

The Department for Business and Trade, Ministry of Justice, and Cabinet Office may wish to consider building on this existing infrastructure by introducing the fiscal and procurement levers needed to embed inclusive hiring more deeply across the economy. Specifically, government could explore introducing employer National Insurance relief for businesses hiring individuals within 12 months of release, with the precise cost and mechanism to be determined through HM Treasury modelling and consultation with employer bodies. Embedding inclusive hiring commitments into public sector procurement contracts above £5 million would further extend the reach of existing schemes. A national "Second Chance Employers" campaign, building on the profile already generated by Employment Advisory Boards, could consolidate and amplify existing momentum.

Employment is the strongest predictor of successful desistance. The infrastructure exists. The missing levers are structural incentives that would make inclusive hiring the norm rather than the exception.

Immediate action: The MoJ could convene a roundtable with leading employers, the New Futures Network, third sector rehabilitation organisations, and sector bodies to identify the specific barriers that remain and co-design a strategy to address them, with outputs delivered by Q3 2026-27.

3. Strengthen Prison Officer Training Through Lived Experience Expertise

HMPPS has made progress in developing trauma-informed and desistance-based approaches to officer training, including the Becoming Trauma Informed programme now being extended from women's prisons into the male estate, and the Impact framework grounded in desistance theory. These are welcome developments. However, this research identifies a specific gap: the systematic involvement of organisations with lived experience expertise in delivering officer training.

Participants in this evaluation described significant cultural shifts on prison wings where the programme operates, including reduced violence, more positive staff-prisoner relationships, and greater engagement with purposeful activity. These shifts depend not only on programme participants but on staff who understand and support the emotional and behavioural change process. Training delivered by individuals with lived experience brings authenticity and credibility, helping staff understand the relational skills needed to support change.

HMPPS may wish to consider commissioning organisations such as Key4Life to develop and deliver training modules for prison officers, complementing rather than replacing existing provision.

Recommended action: HMPPS could commission Key4Life and similar organisations to develop and deliver training modules for prison officers and operational managers that draw on lived experience to help staff better understand and support the emotional and behavioural change process. This could include insights from programme participants and practical tools for supporting emotional development and relational safety. Rollout could be linked to existing officer professional development frameworks, with a pilot commencing in the 2027-28 financial year.

4. Develop a Professionalised Framework for Lived Experience Mentoring

Peer mentoring is already widely practised across the prison estate, with provision including the Prisoners' Education Trust Level 2 Peer Mentor course, the HMPPS Creating Future Opportunities wing model, and various establishment-level schemes. However, the MoJ's own research confirms that these schemes remain non-standardised, inconsistently accredited, and offer little opportunity to share best practice between establishments. There is no national framework recognising lived experience mentoring as a professional pathway with clear standards, training, and employment outcomes.

HM Prison and Probation Service and the Department for Work and Pensions may wish to consider jointly establishing such a framework, building on existing provision rather than replacing it, and recognising lived experience mentoring as a distinct professional pathway with clear standards, training, and employment pathways for programme graduates.

Participants in this evaluation consistently identified their mentoring roles as transformative, not only for those they supported but for their own sense of purpose and desistance. However, uncertainty about expectations, limited formal recognition, and inconsistent support between programme cycles undermine the sustainability and impact of this work. The Government could usefully recognise lived experience as a distinct professional asset within criminal justice, health, and social care sectors, with structured pathways into paid employment as peer mentors, desistance coaches, or rehabilitation practitioners.

PARTICIPANT VOICE: THE VALUE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

"I think it will be quite interesting to see how this program is replicated elsewhere. Because the mentoring cohort that Key4Life were working with here, I would say were a group of talented men of much many years of lived experience within prison. Some doing, most of them doing over a decade in prison. So when you are working with people like that, they've got a lot to bring to the table anyway. For example, if culture carriers and others that are actively engaged in this kind of work are trained by Key4Life, it helps give more momentum and more training towards the work that they're doing and want to go into. So I think in that case, the mentoring side of it does work, where both parties benefit from one another. I think ultimately, the people that you're working with, the mentors, it kind of helps with their rehabilitation as well. So they're likely not to come back to prison. You can't forget that as well."

Salman, Key4Life Programme Participant

Recommended action: There is value in HMPPS commissioning the development of a national Lived Experience Mentoring Standards Framework, drawing on the expertise of organisations such as Key4Life and building on existing accreditation schemes, piloted across a small number of establishments with a pilot commencing in the 2027-28 financial year. DWP could usefully explore employability incentives and support packages for mentors transitioning into peer support roles post-release.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that programmes such as Key4Life deliver precisely the kind of transformative, evidence-based intervention that the government's prison reform agenda demands. At a time when reoffending costs the taxpayer billions annually and prison safety remains a critical concern, relational, lived experience-based rehabilitation programmes represent models with a compelling and growing evidence base, combining cost-effectiveness with measurable impact on desistance, employability, and institutional safety.

The integration of lived experience mentoring, cultural relevance, emotional rehabilitation, and employer engagement addresses multiple policy objectives simultaneously: reducing reoffending, improving prison culture, supporting employment outcomes for prison leavers, and creating self-sustaining change. The twelve interconnected outcomes identified in this research show that rehabilitation is not a linear process but a holistic transformation involving identity, relationships, emotions, and future orientation.

The cost of inaction is clear: continued cycles of reoffending, wasted human potential, unsafe communities, and unsustainable pressure on public services. With appropriate investment and political will, programmes such as Key4Life can be scaled nationally to transform lives, reduce harm, and deliver value for money. The question for government is whether they will be supported, scaled, and sustained. The evidence is compelling. The need is urgent. The opportunity is now.

At a time when prisons across the United Kingdom face rising violence, overcrowding, and persistently high rates of reoffending, the need for effective rehabilitation has never been greater.

This executive summary presents the key findings from an independent qualitative study examining the experiences of men participating in the Key4Life programme at HMP Fosse Way. Key4Life is a seven step programme that supports men from custody through to life in the community. Drawing on interviews with participants and mentors, the research explores how lived experience mentoring, emotional development, employability support, and relationship-based intervention can contribute to rehabilitation, desistance, and safer prison environments.

The findings identify twelve interconnected outcomes linked to participation in the programme, including improved emotional resilience, reduced violence, stronger communication skills, increased confidence, better family relationships, and the development of a prosocial identity.

The report sets out a series of recommendations for policy and practice. Priority recommendations include commission national expansion of relational rehabilitation programmes across the prison estate, strengthen and scale the existing employer engagement infrastructure, strengthen prison officer training through lived experience expertise, and develop a professionalised framework for lived experience mentoring.

Intended for policymakers, prison leaders, practitioners, researchers, and third-sector organisations, this executive summary contributes to growing national discussions surrounding prison reform, public protection, and the future of rehabilitation in the United Kingdom.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For information about the Key4Life programme you can contact info@key4life.org.uk or visit the website for Key4Life by going to www.key4life.org.uk

RESEARCH ENQUIRIES

Dr Natasha Du Rose

London Metropolitan University n.durose@londonmet.ac.uk

The Centre for Security Research & Security natasha.durose@censec.org.uk



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