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‘We need community’: Bridging the path to desistance from crime with community football

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Abstract

Recidivism costs society, communities, families and individuals. Sport is heralded as an accessible way to engage and incentivise people convicted of crime to change their lifestyles. One high-profile intervention designed to reduce reoffending rates is the Twinning Project, which invites people serving custodial and community sentences to participate in a football-based programme to gain accredited qualifications with a major football club in their local region. Our primary objective was to investigate how football, which uses some of the biggest brands and regional allegiances in the United Kingdom, might help to bridge the gap between community and paths to desistance. Using a realist approach, we present interview data from people serving sentences in the community and the coaches and probation officers facilitating intervention programmes at two major British football clubs. Specifically, we conducted interviews with staff and service users serving community sentences in a large British city. Based on social identity perspectives on social exclusion/inclusion, we carried out thematic analysis with the focus on social support, social bonding and resulting future orientation. Thematic analysis revealed four themes: (a) gaps in social support; (b) coach as a role model; (c) increased future orientation; and (d) new ways forward. These themes evidenced the struggles

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people often face before entering the justice system as well as the capacity of high-level coaching around a meaningful shared social identity to reduce the salience of these hurdles and elicit a sense of optimism towards the future. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's [Community and Social Impact Statement](#).

1 | INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom's estimated reoffending cost is £18.1 billion a year (Newton, May, Eames, & Ahman, 2019), with 44% of people reoffending within 12 months of release from prison and 56% of people reoffending after serving a community sentence (Prison Reform Trust, 2022). In the United States, estimates of reoffending are harder to access but the estimated cost of incarceration for a single year is estimated to extend to \$4.7–\$5.7 trillion with over 50% of people being reincarcerated within 3 years of release (Sipes, 2022). The impact of understanding *what works* when it comes to interventions to reduce (re)offending, as well as how it works, whom it works for—and how to reach those who do not engage—is both economic and social, affecting governmental and parliamentary policy, communities, families and the lives of people who receive custodial and community sentences.

Here, we present qualitative research on a novel intervention designed to tackle the issue via the most popular sport in the world that evinces powerful, lasting social identities embedded in communities and generational networks: football (soccer) (Newson, 2019; Newson, Buhrmester, & Whitehouse, 2016; Palacios-Huerta, 2004). Specifically, we conducted interviews with staff and service users serving community sentences enrolled on a football-based intervention ('Twinning Project') at two football clubs in a large British city. Our primary objective was to investigate how football, using some of the biggest brands and regional allegiances in the United Kingdom, could help to bridge the gap between community and paths to desistance. To address this, we tackled the following research questions: What roles do social support, social bonding and future orientation play in retaining intervention participants? How can the project be improved to further encourage desistance from crime?

1.1 | Characteristics of effective community interventions

Reoffending in the United Kingdom has remained stubbornly high over the last decade (Ministry of Justice, 2023). There is meta-analytical evidence showing the effectiveness of individualised programmes in community settings, such as crime prevention among juveniles, particularly for therapeutic (e.g., skill building) programmes (Lipsey, 2009), or restorative justice conferences among adults serving sentences (Strang, Sherman, Mayo-Wilson, Woods, & Ariel, 2013). An evaluation of 14 systematic reviews by Gill (2016), comparing primary and secondary intervention approaches in community settings concludes that not all such programmes appear equally effective at reducing crime outcomes, with more promising results coming from mentoring and restorative justice approaches, compared to traditional diversionary and sanction-based approaches. One interpretation of this is that informal social control mechanisms in communities (such as connecting service users with positive influences in the community) are more effective at binding individuals to communal norms than formal control mechanisms (such as surveillance by probation officers who may lack the skills and resources to implement this approach successfully; Gill, 2016).

The most successful programmes target specific groups or risk factors or bring the person serving a sentence into direct re-engagement with the community (Barnett, Boduszek, & Willmott, 2021). However, community interventions sometimes have the reverse effect. Specifically, some programmes, and some government mandates, may

further stigmatise and partition service users from their communities by highlighting that they have received sentences, for example, by making them wear uniforms including bright colours or specific badges on their clothes or even their homes. Pamment and Ellis (2010) point out that such approaches are shame-inducing, signalling punitive attitudes, rather than the benefits of community labour or integration.

We argue that football-based interventions are naturally positioned to facilitate engagement with informal institutions and access to positive influences in the community based on three factors. First, despite the globalisation of football as an entertainment product, local clubs remain at the centre of their communities, highly respected and deeply integrated into the social, economic and cultural fabric of their area. Thus, the successful completion of one of their programmes via an accredited qualification reflects a high status and easily recognisable achievement, from which participants can benefit.

Second, the coaches employed by Community Club Organisations who are involved in such interventions are highly respected and typically well-known and well-connected in the community. Coaches tend to reflect a prototype of a trusted positive influence, both by virtue of their relational and mentoring profession (Potrac, Nelson, & O'Gorman, 2016), as well as their association with the club. Third, in contrast to the typical use of uniforms in community sentence programmes, football-based interventions give potential access to a uniform evocative of pride, community and success: the kit or club strip. Football itself is a symbol of community, with the kit epitomising themes within football that are also highly relevant to desistance: co-operation, loyalty, good decision-making, punctuality, respect and self-esteem (Wilde, 2004). Our objective was to investigate how football, utilising its standing and associated values, could help to bridge the gap between community and paths to desistance.

1.2 | Sport and reoffending interventions

Sports-based interventions can be viewed as part of a wider, global effort to utilise *sport for development*, where football is a popular platform to address societal issues. These include, for instance, prejudice and racism (Kingett, Abrams, & Purewal, 2017; Marble, Mousa, & Siegel, 2021), healthcare, education, inequality or peacebuilding (Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016). Sports-based interventions within the justice system may be an effective tool in preventing crime and improving well-being, both among young people and adults (Jugl, Bender, & Lösel, 2021; Kelly, 2013). However, some have cautioned against an overly optimistic assessment of the direct link between sports-based interventions and recidivism, as many studies have methodological limitations and pay too little attention to confounding micro- and macro-level factors (Chamberlain, 2013). Nonetheless, the proposed reasons for the general effectiveness of sports-based interventions are threefold.

First, and most obviously, sports is a safe and constructive activity for at-risk individuals who could otherwise engage in less safe, deviant or criminal activities (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). Second, sports interventions provide an opportunity for physical activity, with associated positive effects on dopamine, mood regulation, sustained concentration and a host of physical and mental well-being factors likely to play into desistance behaviours (Meek & Lewis, 2014). Third, sports can provide a potentially unparalleled locus for much-needed social connections. For instance, one British study found that access to community resources and social support for people engaged with the justice system was mostly through sport (both for people in prison and their family members) (Best, Musgrove, & Hall, 2018). Simultaneously, from the perspective of the receiving community, the powerful emotional ties associated with football, as well as the normative values associated with mainstream football cultures at a cognitive level, may help 'sell' probation to the public (Maruna & King, 2008).

However, previous research is limited in explaining precisely what factors make such programmes work, an understanding of which is crucial for their successful large-scale implementation (Jugl et al., 2021). Here, we focus on the social identity factor and propose that sport facilitates social connections, which in turn offer a platform from which confidence and self-esteem can grow, job or educational opportunities can be discussed and supported and access to community resources including finances can be tapped. Fundamentally, sport has the potential to create an

experience of inclusion and social acceptance and to divert people from socially transgressive towards socially acceptable objectives and behaviour (cf. Abrams & Christian, 2007; Abrams, Hogg, & Marques, 2005). Through the social networks emerging from shared physical exercise, participants gain a sense of belonging and, with this, feelings of purpose and meaning (Cohen, Davis, & Taylor, 2023; Davis, Taylor, & Cohen, 2015).

Central to this proposition are the identities service users enter the programme with, and the potential for identity shifts and group processes to occur once engaged with the programme. This relates to our research questions concerning the roles social support, social bonding and future orientation might have in both retaining intervention participants and supporting them to desist from crime.

1.3 | Positive social identities and future orientations

Some relatively new theories in the criminology literature are linked, among other things, to foundational social psychology, particularly Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory provides the wider theoretical framing of the project, within which the focal research questions for the paper are situated, specifically concerning how participants reimagine key roles and relationships that are important to them. Social identities, the glue that holds groups together, are widely referred to in the desistance literature, particularly in the Identity Theory of Desistance, which describes the process of desistance as an identity transformation towards a positive, non-criminal self (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), or the Social Identity Model of Transition, which further emphasises the role of micro- and macro-factors in shaping such transformation processes (Kay & Monaghan, 2019).

There is a growing body of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, which supports the idea that positive identity change is linked to desistance (Bachman, Kerrison, Paternoster, O'Connell, & Smith, 2016; Liu & Bachman, 2021). For example, it is well established that family and friends are vital to reducing desistance (Farmer, 2019). This process occurs by entrenching and enhancing social support networks and assisting pro-social identities (Duwe & Clark, 2017). For many people with sentences, some of these relationships are not stable (Whitehouse & Fitzgerald, 2020). For instance, 24% of sentence holders in England are care-leavers, despite representing only 1% of the general population (MacAlister, 2022). Clearly, community interventions that offer potentially vulnerable community members routes towards identities that are both meaningful and easily accessible could be beneficial—how well positioned is football to bridge this gap?

Even in the face of personal disadvantage, social identity, namely identifying with a social group to which one can attach positive value, can be sufficient to bolster well-being (Abrams et al., 2020). Indeed, the Social Cure Model posits that more group involvement equates to better mental and physical health outcomes and longevity (Haslam, Jetten, Cruwys, Dingle, & Haslam, 2018; Jetten, Haslam, & Alexander, 2012). As stigmatised and excluded groups are at particular risk of negative well-being and health effects (Jay et al., 2021; Jetten, Iyer, Branscombe, & Zhang, 2013), it seems viable that access to positive and meaningful social connections for the marginalised group of people serving community or custodial sentences could be strongly beneficial. This line of reasoning is supported by Best et al.'s research (2018) showing that among a sample of prisoners and their family members, those with more connections to recovery (for substance abuse) and community resources also reported better physical well-being. While social capital is clearly essential (i.e., access to sport and recreation, recovery and community groups, education, training and employment, or safe housing), psychological association with the group itself is a form of capital, giving individuals a sense of belonging, worth and recognition (Abrams et al., 2005; Abrams & Christian, 2007).

However, efforts to induce or form new identities are notoriously fraught with challenges. A recent review of interventions to change social identities in the general population found little evidence for forming new identities (Barnett et al., 2021). Nonetheless, over the last few decades, criminologists and researchers working in the justice sector have focussed more heavily on processes of secondary desistance from crime (i.e., when an individual adopts a non-offending identity, beyond primary desistance relating to cessation of offending; see King, 2013). Importantly, we recognise that measuring the effectiveness of community corrections efforts cannot be reduced to blunt

indicators of individual behaviour, such as recidivism (Butts & Schiraldi, 2018). Recidivism reflects police activity and enforcement, as well as court processing and, due to biases in police practices, disadvantaged communities are likely to be inaccurately represented by such measures. Instead, research that incorporates an understanding of other outcomes of success, such as personal identities, social connections, employment, education and housing will support more responsible law enforcement and policymaking. A particularly promising opportunity for positive and sustained identity formation, with associated well-being and behavioural improvements, comes from football.

2 | THE PRESENT STUDY: TWINNING PROJECT IN THE COMMUNITY

With reoffending reaching crisis point, the football community launched a high-profile charitable sports intervention for people serving community sentences, provided by football clubs within the local community. Titled 'The Twinning Project', due to its principal goal to pair every prison with its local major football club, the intervention tasks itself with providing coach-led FA- (Football Association) accredited qualifications to people serving custodial or probationary services with a view to reducing reoffending. Since its launch in 2018, the Twinning Project has operated with over 70 major, professional football clubs and their local prisons and probation areas in the United Kingdom with a growing number of international sites. It is designed to provide coaching, refereeing or stewarding training to boost service users' employability and provide access to the wider football community and its considerable infrastructure.

Twining Project is a tertiary prevention programme, an effort to rehabilitate and prevent recidivism among people convicted of crimes and serving either custodial sentences in prison or community sentences (Newson & Whitehouse, 2020). Here, we focus on the latter group, whose sentences are an alternative to imprisonment or constitute a post-release period of supervision. For probation, the programme draws on the community as its physical setting in the form of a stadium and associated buildings like classrooms and training grounds, but also on community resources (both formal and informal), indirectly promoting social cohesion. Community programmes are typically up to 12 weeks of half-day weekly sessions with around seven participants, with an upper limit of 16 participants, though sessions typically comprise fewer participants. Sessions comprise interactive classroom work, physical activity and opportunities for role-playing the new skills learned (e.g., coaching peers).

At the time of writing, the Twinning Project is was neither considered community service nor a mandatory programme: engagement is voluntary and in addition to other legal and social obligations. In the programme, HMPPS (His Majesty's Prison and Probation) probation officers are responsible for recruiting suitable service users. Football coaches lead interactive sessions that combine life skills (e.g., punctuality, social skills) with football skills (e.g., technique, coaching skills) and act as the primary points of contact who can further facilitate contact and opportunities for participants, for example, in cases where they require references for further employment or education. At the end of the programme, participants are eligible for a coaching qualification accredited by the FA, the governing football association. Further details about the Twinning Project can be found on its website.

Our research took place in a large British city in the United Kingdom, where two clubs are working with the Twinning Project and the probation service: one a Premier League club and the other a Championship club at the time the research was conducted. Both teams have long traditions and enjoy historical local support and national recognition for their extended participation in the top football leagues. At the time of conducting the research, the city was also ranked the second most dangerous major city in the United Kingdom, with 76% more crime than the national average (CrimeRate, 2023).

In the present research, we explored whether and how the Twinning Project supported positive identity transition and its potential role in participants' rehabilitation processes. This research offers the first qualitative assessment of the programme since it was launched (Newson & Whitehouse, 2020) and provides a unique case study, while also addressing the gap in our understanding of how community structures are used to reduce reoffending. To this end, we addressed the following research questions with interview data:

1. How do participants connect with the Twinning Project and the other people on the programme, if at all?
2. What impact does the Twinning Project have on the future orientation of people serving sentences in the community (i.e., on probation)?
3. How might the Twinning Project or club programmes in the community be improved?

3 | METHOD

This study employs a realist approach as outlined by Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021). This approach navigates a path through the contained and polarised positivist and interpretivist traditions that have dominated the thematic analyses conducted by qualitative researchers in recent decades. This approach loosely draws from Bhasakar's (1989) 'stratified ontology', which asserts that there are both observable, empirical truths *and* truths in unseen domains that we can only ascertain via more visible empirical truths. This realist approach makes space for triangulation of our findings in the future, specifically quantitative research that is underway for a larger, prison-based cohort.

3.1 | Study setting

The programme itself is dependent on a triad of commitment: from the sport background (the club and the Twinning Project), the justice system (probation service, i.e., probation officers and offender managers) and service users themselves (who may also have support workers and family members encouraging or enabling their participation). HMPPS recruits participants for programmes via Offender Managers or Probation Officers suggesting the Twinning Project to people serving probation sentences. We included multiple perspectives in our interviews: service users, football coaches delivering programmes and probation staff associated with the programme.

3.2 | Study participants

The sample comprised all participants, probation and football club staff associated with the Twinning Project intervention in the region under study over a 6-month period in 2021. We used convenience sampling to collect interviews from two sites, including participants enrolled on programmes ($n = 7$) and staff ($n = 5$). As such, those who did not attend the programme on the days that we conducted interviews were excluded from the research. This is a particularly hard-to-reach community, where engagement with academics who may be perceived as being part of 'the system' is often limited. Nevertheless, all Twinning Project staff and participants who were present on the days that we visited the two sites participated. The sample size was thus somewhat determined by the circumstances but was deemed adequate to produce the main themes based on sample sizes discussed by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), after which point subsequent interviews would have been unlikely to reveal new generalisable phenomena. Although all service users have unique stories when entering probation services, at this point we appeared to reach data saturation and new themes that had the potential to be generalisable were no longer emerging.

Participants were from a range of backgrounds, which we aggregate here to avoid any possibility of identification. All participants lived in the city under study and the surrounding area, but most had grown up in other urban areas in England. Service users' ethnicities were diverse, including White, Black (Black British, Black Caribbean and Black African), South Asian and Mixed. Ages ranged from 18 to 50, with the majority of service users being under 25. Service users had a mix of upbringings, including single-parent families, being raised by a grandmother, families with two parents and experience of the care system. We did not obtain data on the Index Offence (past convictions) for service users, but they were all serving community sentences, that is, crimes that had not received custodial sentences, including low-level drug crime, violence, driving crimes and theft. No sex offenders were permitted on the

programme. Staff were both Black and White. Apart from one probation officer, all staff were male. Staff ages ranged from under 30 to over 50, with the majority being between 30 and 40.

3.3 | Data collection procedures

Each site was observed for a full session by two researchers who would describe themselves as British, middle-class and female (a more detailed reflexivity statement can be found in the [supporting information](#)). At each site, service users were told that researchers would be visiting and information sheets were sent round for distribution prior to our arrival. We brought additional information sheets explaining the purpose of the study, which we handed out before verbally explaining how participation was optional and would have no impact on service users' success in the Twinning Project course. We made it clear that the programme was being assessed, rather than the individuals who participate in it. Verbal consent was collected prior to data collection, and interviews were conducted with all service users and staff who were present that day, which lasted up to 25 min. The interviews were semi-structured with questions on the Twinning Project, group identities, future orientation, helping behaviours and reoffending. Interview prompts are included in the [supporting information](#). Participants were debriefed at the end of each interview.

Conversations were not recorded to avoid a formalised setting implied by the recording device, which could impact participants' tone and account (Guest et al., 2006), and to reduce concerns about the anonymity of answers. Instead, researchers took active notes by hand, the quality of which was ensured via use of a printed interview rubric where researchers could record accounts, quotes and themes as they occurred in response to specific questions. Researchers typed up their notes within 24 hr to reduce the risk of misinterpreting handwritten notes. As asserted by previous qualitative researchers, there are instances where interview data is *best* without tape recorders, rather than *second best* (Rutakumwa et al., 2020). We feel that this position applies to our case (for a step-by-step account of the data collection procedure, please see [SI.1](#) in the supporting information).

The study received full ethical approval from the University of Oxford and the National Research Committee. The British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct was followed. All researchers had completed Adult Safeguarding Training prior to conducting the interviews. All interviewee names have been changed.

3.4 | Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to determine key themes across the Twinning Project in the community programmes. We applied a reflexive approach, which allowed us to draw on Twinning Project pilot data collected in prisons suggesting that bonding with the Twinning Project is associated with improvements to behaviour in prison. Consistent with the six-stage approach from Braun and Clarke (2006), our thematic analysis was open-ended to investigate how service users experienced, and how coaches and probation officers perceived, the programme. Since social identity perspectives suggest that social identity and its associated transitions underlie the effectiveness of sports-based interventions, we directed our focus to matters of social belonging and access to groups. As such, the research was deductive, seeking out themes concerning social bonding and identities. Equally, the research was inductive, with data being understood as having explicit meanings connected to the data itself and producing coherent themes.

We deemed a contextualist framework appropriate to incorporate the realist aspect of the research and our academic engagement with key stakeholders who provisioned the programme (i.e., HMPPS, the Twinning Project and the football clubs). This enabled us to contextualise interviews beyond the confines of our interview questions. Including a realist method was vital for participants to express their lived experience of participating in a community sports intervention and the meanings that might be attached to this. Engaging with service user and staff perspectives from the realist perspective enabled the researchers to at once appreciate the views of those with the most

experience of the programme, and to better appreciate meanings that might not fit with the theoretical perspective we originally employed Robinson (2014).

The lead researcher read the raw data and identified initial codes to address the research questions, which was shared with a second researcher. The second researcher re-examined the raw data and discussed the codes and supporting data with the first author. For reliability, the themes were then shared with the research team who discussed and re-examined the supporting data. During this process, the main codes were not disputed, though the names of themes were improved by discussion until a consensus was reached. Once agreed upon, our deductive approach allowed us to expand upon theme definitions by using the wider literature.

4 | RESULTS

The analysis produced four main themes: (a) gaps in social support; (b) coach as a role model; (c) extended future orientation; and (d) new ways forward. Within the themes, the following subthemes emerged: (a) filling gaps with the Twinning Project/social capital as success; (b) affiliation/practical techniques; (c) indicators of social insecure environments/changes to future orientation; (d) small group sizes pose a problem/community awareness.

4.1 | 'Shit happens': Gaps in social support

4.1.1 | Subtheme: Filling gaps with the Twinning Project

All but one participant alluded to having little support in their lives beyond their family and several participants did not have family support at all.

Rahim: 'I'm not really part of my family. I've been independent from a young age. When school ended, I didn't have friends in the same way. They just didn't bother'.

Evan: 'I'm not close to my family, my friends live far away. I used to have friends and family, but shit happens'.

Ryan: 'Not really [with reference to being part of any groups]'.

Ben: 'Other [football] fans understand me, know where I'm coming from...[I had] family and friends, more family now, just some friends'.

Nigel lived with his partner, two children and his partner's niece whom he was also helping to raise since her mother died. That morning he was late to the session as he was dropping his niece to school. He grew up in a supportive family, with a strong Christian upbringing, which he rejected for alternative spiritual practices. For Nigel, the gaps in social support were societal:

'The ones you expected to be there are gone and then there's some you didn't really expect, and they're still there'.

Nigel, referring to being Black, said: 'Usually you have to fight for it [opportunities], there's not much around here that can integrate you'.

Nigel also commented on community disparity more generally: 'We need community, neighbours, but people are trained to see fear in one another...I know people who have nothing, all of their families involved [in crime], it's all they know. When you're on the road and the streets, there's only three places: death, jail or mental health. I've been there. I've seen it'.

For some service users, particularly at the Championship club, with its tight-knit fans who were enrolled on the programme, the Twinning Project group had already become a primary social group.

Charlie: '[In the past] my group was drink, drugs and crime. My friends were violent, druggies. At 28 I was homeless, then I got off the streets and things changed. Had to have different friendships, not abusing drugs'.

Charlie also commented on how different he was with the TP group: 'with these lads [gestures to the whole group, including the coach and probation officer], I'm different, yeah, it's great, [I'm] more confident'.

Habib: 'I've got friends and family. I'm close with my family. But the Twinning Project is a good start to my day. My probation officer used to be on my case, she told me I should be in prison. Now she only calls me once a month because I'm doing so well since [it started]'.

Habib expressed concern with his friendship groups outside of the programme: 'If you're just out with friends you can get into trouble, they might be involved in something...'

Coaches and probation officers also recognised the strong social ties between service users on the programme.

Probation officer 1: 'There is more of a bond between them...[They have gone] from shy and nervous to very comfortable, all giving each other fist bumps, all chatty...'

Coach 1: 'The Twinning Project has a presence in the community. It can reach them. It supports everyone'.

Coach 2: '[They have become more] social, each of them. Then there's family support, it going back to the family and seeing them through'.

4.1.2 | Subtheme: Social capital as success

Success tended to be framed relationally—such as success via continued relations with the club or improving personal relationships. For instance, a participant who went on to coach their child's football team was considered a success story by coaches. To close the interview, we asked participants about some of the kind things they do for others and why they do those things. These questions were intended to provide an opportunity for positive self-reflection for the participant after questions about their offending history, in line with ethical standards. However, the responses offer a pertinent view into the social outlook service users have, even in often socially bleak or challenging environments. These self-reported acts of kindness included Ben helping a stranger cross the road, 'giving money to beggars', and helping with his mum's garden. Rahim, who had little connection to family or friends, recounted helping 'a lot of people in [his] life'. He told us about teaching someone in his shared accommodation how to fold their clothes, escorting peers who were too scared to go out alone, lending people his phone when they had no credit, offering people in his shared accommodation food when they had no money

and even going to the shops for someone in his shared accommodation who did not own any shoes of their own.

Charlie relayed a story of when he helped a blind man get on to a bus: 'he [the blind man] kept walking into things with his stick and everyone else was just watching, watching and watching him. He was in danger. I thought if he tells me to do one, he tells me to do one, but I can ask [to help]'.

Habib: 'I went to Uni but my friend carried on selling [drugs]. I told him to stop and do an access course. I gave him money to finish [the course] and helped him stay out of trouble. He was a loyal friend, he kept it real. There is trust [between us]. He's like family. No fake friends'.

Nigel articulated how on the one hand societal structures prevent community cohesion, but also reported having stepped in to protect the societal institutions that incarcerated him, such as defending a prison gym in the 2017 prison riots. Nigel was also helping to raise his partner's niece, which had made him late to sessions on occasion due to taking this child, as well as his own children, to nursery school.

4.2 | 'That's what I want to be like as a coach': Coach as a role model

4.2.1 | Subtheme: Affiliation

Most service users reported feeling more socially supported as the programme progressed, especially by the coach—but also by one of the probation officers who was actively involved on the programme (participating in the warmups and activities alongside the service users).

Evan: 'I genuinely feel like they [the coaches] are trying to help. He [coach] can have fun but can be serious, he is trying to teach. That's what I want to be like as a coach'.

Habib: '[Coach and probation officer] have been helpful, they speak to me like a proper person... [Coach] told me to bring my friends and tell them about the opportunities, that's made me want to take it [TP] serious'.

Ryan: '[Coach] has really helped... [Coach and probation officer] are good teachers'.

One coach said that the service users had 'opened up' during the programme. Not only did this facilitate a strong rapport between participants and the coaches, but also gave the coach an opportunity to act as a source of social support: 'Ryan had personal stuff going on one week [and] phoned me to tell me why he couldn't come [to the session]'. (Coach 2)

The positive relations between the coaches and service users were also commented on by a probation officer: 'There's an atmosphere of respect. Not one of relying on [the coaches but one of] mutual respect'. (Probation officer 1)

4.2.2 | Subtheme: Practical techniques

Coaches implemented seating arrangements to encourage dialogue, such as a horseshoe shape.

One probation officer associated high levels of commitment to the programme with the atmosphere of mutual respect the coach had induced—highlighting the strong rapport that exists between the service users and the coach.

Probation officer: ‘One of [the service users] has PTSD, he had a relapse during the programme. He got his key worker to call me, as his medication messed up and he was having a really bad time. It might not sound like a big deal, but he was so committed to the course that although he couldn't call himself, he went to the effort of getting his key worker to call. Usually people [on probation] just wouldn't bother turning up and face the consequences later. It's [the coach], there's an atmosphere of respect, not one of relying on [the coach or probation officer], [one of] mutual respect’.

4.3 | ‘Getting here is helping me get up’: Extended future orientation

Nearly all service users gave examples of harsh or challenging environments when they were growing up and reported finding it hard to imagine themselves reaching old age. However, most service users noted a change in themselves, either prior to joining the programme (which consequently enabled them to commit to the programme) or whilst on it. These changes regarded more positive social networks, a focus on the future, and approaching life more slowly rather than engaging in fast-paced or risky lifestyle choices.

4.3.1 | Subtheme: Indicators of socially insecure environments

Charlie: ‘Never seen myself as an old man’.

Habib: ‘Never really thought about [getting older]’

Rahim: ‘I've been nearly shot, stabbed. I've seen a lot. I changed’.

Ben: ‘If you lived to [old age], you'd lose all your friends; they'd all be dead by then’.

Evan: ‘I'm surprised I've lived until now! Didn't think I'd live to 25 because of the lifestyle: I was using and selling drugs. Heavy drugs.’

Evan also said that he took things ‘day by day’ and that he ‘won't reach old age’.

4.3.2 | Subtheme: Changes to future orientation

Several participants pointed to new opportunities related to their experience on the Twinning Project, particularly regionally in relation to the development of a railway project that the coach had connections to offering stable and secure work.

Evan's future orientation had improved in some regards but he was still constrained by both his environment (i.e., poverty) and past experiences, he said ‘Now I want to live healthy, but it's expensive...’.

Nigel: ‘I cut a lot of people out of my life, there's been a shift. Before [5-7 years ago], my mindset shifted. It got clearer. I switched from thinking about *now* to thinking about long term... I'd rather live

long and do things correctly, than live fast. It's about putting the right foot first. There's no point going fast in the wrong direction. I've done it loads, it's a dead end. Everyone's in a hurry. I'd rather go slowly; it's about passing that knowledge on [to children]'.

The experience of playing on the club's actual pitch was profound for Charlie: 'It's a once in a lifetime opportunity. I'll carry that with me for the rest of my life... Just because I'm 32, doesn't mean my dreams all just disappear'.

At 21, Habib felt that he was aware of his own mortality and said: 'by the end of my 20s I want to live healthier, I want to be active. I started going to the gym'.

Ryan: 'It's [the Twinning Project] helping me. Getting here is getting me up.'

A change in service users' orientation toward the future was also noted by the coaches delivering the programme.

Coach 1: 'Their eyes have been opened to the opportunities available to them, not just in football. Their aspirations have risen; now, they want a life outside of prison. Their mental well-being has improved, confidence has increased, [they're] more hopeful'.

Coach 2 said that service users' aspirations for the future since joining the programme included 'plans to go on to the Railway programme [a much sought after local skills and work option], become a personal trainer or football coach or go back to college to be qualified to work at [the football club or Railway]'.

4.4 | 'More camaraderie, more people to learn from': New ways forward

Several opportunities to improve the programme were identified by service users, probation officers and coaches. Subthemes for the new ways forward concerned expanding the small group size and increasing community awareness. All but one service user mentioned that the small group sizes were a problem. This was largely considered to be due to around 50% of participants dropping out before the programme began. All the participants we interviewed mid-way through the programme were retained to completion.

4.4.1 | Subtheme: Small group sizes pose a problem

Nigel: 'A bigger group [would bring] more energy [to the programme], it would be more excitable. [There would be] more camaraderie, more people to learn from'.

Habib: '[The programme could be improved if there were] more numbers, six to eight people'.

Ben: '[The programme would improve if there were] more people, seven [people] was okay'.

A desire for larger group sizes was especially felt by service users who went out of their way to attend sessions.

Evan: 'More numbers [is something that could be improved]. They [TP] said you had to give 100% attendance, I come early every week because I have to travel an hour [to get here on time], but other people are late or don't turn up. Six would be a good number, you don't want too many people, you don't want to be the only one talking but also want [a chance to speak]'.

Coaches and probation officers recognised the challenges service users might face that prevented them from attending sessions. Several reasons for dropping out were offered by probation officers, including hospitalisation, getting a paid job and living too far away. Speculative reasons for dropout provided by coaches and probation officers included the long lead-in time, timing (morning sessions are considered challenging for young people with 'night owl' lifestyles) and service users having family commitments prior to the programme starting.

Probation officer: '[The] sign up to start date is too long on reflection, not for most of us [probation officers and coaches] but for people on probation. Attrition is due to how quickly things change with these lifestyles, so it would be better if you sign up the one week and start the next'.

Probation officer 1: '[There has been] less visibility of the programme due to covid. More face to face [work would have meant that] TP would have come up naturally more, it just wasn't on probation officers' minds – they're overworked and have a list to work through without really knowing what's going on in their cases' lives'.

Coach 2: 'A later start time to help with travel [could improve attendance]. Evening or weekend sessions [could] accommodate work commitments'.

4.4.2 | Subtheme: Community awareness

It was also felt that greater community awareness would not only generate enthusiasm for the programme, but have the potential to increase participation.

Charlie: 'No [there's] not really [anything to improve], just get it [TP] more well known, by the community and general public. Get it out there more, on Blues TV, then people can sign up if they want'.

Habib: 'I think other people might think, what's the point of a L1 coaching qualification, I felt like that, but now I'm really enjoying it and they've [service users not enrolled] have missed out'.

Coach: 'Twinning Project has a massive impact in the community and in custody, people don't know enough about it. There should be greater awareness about end outcomes of the programme and more football clubs involved'.

Overall, service users and staff suggested that the community intervention programme had a strong role in filling social gaps, particularly regarding role modelling from the coach, and increasing future outlook. For some, the experience had been their first sense of completing any kind of programme, including mainstream education. All participants had an eye on the future, offering new ways forward that would strengthen the experience of future cohorts.

5 | DISCUSSION

Using a realist approach, this research explored the role a football-based intervention might play in providing foundational links to the community to support desistance from crime. Perspectives were taken from multiple actors, including service users, probation staff and coaches. Our analyses revealed four themes that connect to our wider theoretical framework of social identity theory: gaps in social support (that the programme was able to fill to varying degrees of success); coach as a role model; extended future orientation; and new ways forward for the intervention itself.

All service users reported gaps in their past social support, which is not uncommon for the wider population of people with experience of the justice system. Access to resources and positive social networks are essential to avoid crime (Farmer, 2019), which ties into the vital, guiding role our social identities play in our attitudes and behaviours as outlined by Social Identity Theory (Abrams et al., 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tellingly, prosocial behaviour and acts of kindness were not new to participants, revealing how important it is to recognise service users' agency and self-determined action regarding the effects of interventions that purport to shift behaviours and identities. Social connections between the group, particularly support from the coach, gave service users opportunities for new relationships and to break past patterns. Such positive relationships, forged through the common ground of the football community, may help open the door to further relationships in the wider community. Work by Mousa (2020) has shown how integrating Christians and Muslims in Iran via local football clubs can reduce prejudice and increase prosocial behaviour between communities. Future research could apply the same techniques to prison/community football clubs.

Our study highlights coaches as prototypical role models in the receiving community. They served as positive examples for participants and their relational approach was appreciated across both cohorts; as such, coaches potentially acted as secure bases for trusting services and wider groups (Jetten et al., 2012; Klein & Bastian, 2023). We also observed one instance where the probation officer was perceived in a similar way, which further contributed to the positive experiences of users. This is in line with evidence that institutional staff attitudes towards people in the justice system (e.g., prisoners) are important predictors of service users' experiences (Molleman & Leeuw, 2012). Considering the unequal, and often troubled, relationships between service users and probation officers, it could be argued that a shared interest in football allows staff and service users to connect more readily. Periods of time built into community intervention programmes during which participants can develop relationships with service providers is considered effective practice due to giving participants a sense of purpose (Barry, 2007; King, 2013), which our research further supports.

In donning the high-status, branded kit and stepping into a societally valued, prestigious stadium for an intervention, Twinning Project participants are given access to opportunities they—or indeed many people—are unlikely to have had before. This appeared to help orient them towards more positive future outlooks, which may be explained by a social identity perspective: *by being invested in, they had permission to invest in themselves*. Alongside this, participants commonly reported a transition regarding attitudes towards their physical health, which may be indicative of the proposed health benefits associated with sports-based interventions more generally (Meek & Lewis, 2014). While we cannot establish a causal link between Twinning Project participants adopting the future outlook taught by coaches and possible corresponding health behaviours, a recent study by Walters (2019) showed that the development of a specific identity was longitudinally linked to changes in future orientation and, subsequently, desistance outcomes. While this evidence comes from a study among juveniles and focuses on the identity change surrounding maturation, the themes observed in our study bear resemblance to these findings and complement the theorised processes of the Identity Theory of Desistance and behaviour change (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

5.1 | Limitations and further directions

However, far from being a panacea, this football-based programme also entails some challenges. For instance, although sign-up to the programme was generally good, attendance to the first session was poor. This might have

been due to broader challenges faced by people serving community sentences, such as lack of transport or adequate childcare which are linked to established risk factors (e.g., low income, Yukhnenko, Blackwood, & Fazel, 2020), but perhaps also due to temporal limitations such as COVID-19. When the research was conducted, probation practitioners largely worked from home (Phillips, Westaby, Ainslie, & Fowler, 2021) so service users rarely met their probation officers face-to-face and coaches had structural barriers in place limiting opportunities for rapport. The programme was limited to participants that the probation service selected. Would programme cohorts be as successful with a wider and potentially more representative sample of people on probation? Furthermore, no sex offenders were included in the research, as part of the clubs' agreement to participate in the Twinning Project programme at a national level. Although social divides appeared to be relatively well transcended by football on this programme, the stigma surrounding sexual offences might mean that service users with these sentences would not benefit from the opportunities such community-centred programmes can offer (Moss, Stephens, & Seto, 2022).

In addition, our research includes several limitations. First, data were collected at a single time point: future work needs a longitudinal time frame to gauge long-term impacts on service users' social relationships, attitudes and behaviours. Lessons could also be learned from interviewing participants who dropped out of the programme or participants' family members. Although our research included a sample that broadly captured the age range and ethnic backgrounds engaged with the programme, we only analysed one urban area, and no women were included. Future studies with women will need to pay particular attention to the complexities of women's health, histories of trauma and childcare—which this research did not have scope for but other studies of sports interventions in the justice sector have identified a need for (e.g., Meek & Lewis, 2014).

Extensions of the research would benefit from a quantitative approach that directly tests behavioural changes (e.g., reconviction rates), which was not possible for the small sample participating in community iterations of the Twinning Project. We are currently analysing quantitative survey and behavioural data from a large study of Twinning Project participants who served custodial sentences (Newson & Whitehouse, 2020), a project for which we will also analyse reoffending data. Further research in community settings could also explore how such interventions might best incorporate receiving communities and increase the visibility of service users' successes. Finally, we believe that further research into the relationship between the coach and service users could be a particularly fruitful avenue. More specifically, how might the coach relationship help manifest identity transformations among service users and act as a template for future positive relationships?

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Sports-based interventions, particularly high-profile ones such as those hinging around influential football clubs, have the potential to offer people serving probationary sentences access to positive and meaningful community experiences. The social identities associated with football clubs, the opportunities for inclusion in the communities they are situated within and the communities that they create, may offer participants access to community resources, such as pathways to further training or jobs. Perhaps most uniquely, though, the relationship with the coach serves as a secure base to both start trusting community facilitators and to inspire self-esteem and behaviours that might emulate a coach's strengths. With excellent coaching come cohorts that are cohesive and supportive of one another, which is vital in the wider landscape of social deprivation that affect many participants when serving probationary sentences.

What the football element seems to offer beyond the capacity of other community interventions is hope. We observed how participants' future orientation seemed to expand in relation to their participation: from being invested in and trusted with a prestigious kit, to being given time and care from a respected coach, the programme gives participants hope that they are worthwhile and that their lives are worth investing in. With socially bonded cohorts, this sentiment is perceived to be shared by the wider cohort, helping participants to have a shared sense of worth, inclusion and a positive identity formation around an identity that is usually shamed and stigmatised.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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