Chapter 22
Outlining the Co-Development of Twelve Desistance Principles to Reduce Sexual Reoffending: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The number of people managed under MAPPA in England and Wales has risen significantly, creating new challenges for police supervising individuals with sexual convictions. Responding to calls for desistance-focused practices, this case study

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explores a co-produced project designed to support MOSOVO officers in adopting desistance-oriented approaches. Through participatory action research, police officers, people with lived experience, and academics collaborated to create three practical tools: a Desistance Practice Framework, a Desistance Management Plan, and Twelve Principles for Assisting Desistance. These were refined through stakeholder input and aim to help police support individual change, reduce reoffending, and manage growing caseloads more effectively. The principles provide a foundation for embedding desistance into policing, aligning risk management with rehabilitation and human rights.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade the number of people managed by Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) and subject to sexual offender notification requirements, in England and Wales, has risen by 52% (Kewley & Karsna, 2025). This growth is likely a result of improved recording of sexual offences (Office for National Statistics, 2023), the introduction of several new sexual offences (Voyeurism Act, 2019; Serious Crime Act, 2015; Online Safety Act 2023), changes to sentence lengths (UK Parliament, Sentencing Bill, 2023) and updates to the provision of civil orders (Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014; Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022). The trajectory of this growth is set to continue, meaning more people subject to sexual offender notification requirements will be managed in the community by the police for longer periods of time. With over 73% of this population already managed by the police (Cain et al., 2026), this is a concern.

The increase in demand brings with it significant challenges to police professionals responsible for the risk assessment and management of this population. Across England and Wales public protection officers or Management of Sexual and Violence Offender (MOSOVO)[1] officers have a unique role, that requires them to supervise people subject to sexual offender notification requirements (by developing risk management plans that both restrict and prevent the person from causing harm to others), whilst balancing their needs by applying constructive interventions into the risk management plan. It is vital that public protection strategies do not compromise the human rights of any individual, including the people MOSOVO officers manage as well as the rights of the victims and general public ('College of Policing', 2025). However, in a predominantly risk averse criminal justice system, this tension is difficult for MOSOVO officers to address in practice - particularly when working with individuals known to the system who may present a risk of reoffending (Pemberton et al., 2023).

In addition, the context in which MOSOVOs operate consists of multiple interlocking challenges, including, workforce pressures and recruitment (Hesketh & Stubbs, 2025), the systemic problems of detecting and investigating serious sexual offences (Dalton et al., 2022), under-resourcing of multi-agency teams (e.g. probation, health, housing) that impact the quality of supervision and opportunity to treatment support (Kirton & Guillaume, 2019) along with poor inter-agency information sharing, that further complicates efforts to balance public protection with rehabilitation (Mann et al., 2018). Any further sexual re-offending is unacceptable but, the re-conviction rate of people with sexual convictions, when compared to other offender types are relatively low. Research finds recidivism rates of between 5% to 15% (after five years in the community) and 10% to 20% after a 10 year follow up period (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; A. J. R. Harris & Hanson, 2004; Helmus et al., 2012). This is in keeping with a recent proactive online investigation (between April 2020 and September 2022), whereby the National Crime Agency detected one in 10 people of committing child sexual abuse to be 'actively' managed by either probation or police services (National Crime Agency, 2024). To assist MOSOVO officers in supervising people subject to notification requirements and determine the level of intervention required, robust risk assessments must be undertaken.

The Active Risk Management System (ARMS) is a structured professional judgment risk assessment tool, it guides MOSOVO officers to identify both dynamic risk and protective factors related to sexual offending and desistance that should inform a subsequent risk management plan (Mydlowski & Turner-Moore, 2023; Mydlowski, Turner-Moore & Kewley, 2024; Kewley & Blandford, 2017). The quality of these assessments has been found to be problematic, in recent studies risk management plans were inconsistent and poor (Kewley, Osman, et al., 2020) problems around the utilisation of plans (Mann & Lundrigan, 2021) were found to be, in part, due to the insufficient police public protection resources (Mann et al., 2019). Thus, with this increasing population, and scarce public agency resources, an alternative approach to managing this population is needed.

In a recent independent review of police-led management of people with sexual offences Creedon (2023) made several recommendations, one of which called for MOSOVOs to engage a greater focus on supporting the desistance process and promoting protective factors with people with sexual offences. This, he argued would not only help reduce the risk a person may present in the community but would help to alleviate the burden of large caseloads, allowing MOSOVOs to invest greater resources to those with the greatest risk and need. This approach algins with the PEEL 2025-27 assessment framework, that will measure the extent to which forces effectively engage with "prevention orders and schemes to safeguard vulnerable people and manage the risk that offenders pose" (PEEL assessment framework 2025–27. p.18).

THE CASE STUDY

This case study briefly outlines and introduces work produced following a co-developed research project[2]. The work was undertaken in response to Creedon' s (2023) call for the police to have a greater focus on desistance practice when supervising people subjected to sexual notification requirements. A small internal 'seedcorn' grant was awarded by Liverpool John Moores University Forensic Research Institute and in-kind resources from Lancashire Constabulary to help fund the work. We co-developed three outputs from this project which includes a *Desistance Practice-Framework*, *Twelve Desistance Principles*, and a *Desistance Management Plan*. We do not intend to discuss all outputs; details of the Desistance Practice Framework and Desistance Management Plan can be accessed in Cain et al (2026). Here we summarise the Twelve Desistance Principles needed for police constabularies to embed desistance focussed practice.

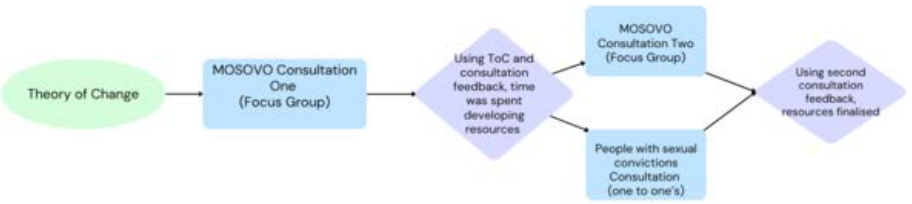
A NOTE ON DESISTANCE

Desistance is the cessation of criminal behavior. It requires both cognitive and behavioural change, through increased pro-social and structural support (Maruna, 2001; Laws & Ward, 2011). Positive informal (e.g. family and friends) and formal (e.g. police supervisors) relationships are crucial in fostering successful desistance outcomes (Weaver, 2015). As are But because desistance combines several psychosocial theories, applying these into the everyday police supervision of people subject to sexual notification requirements is complex and requires guidance (Fox, 2022). To support police constabularies and MOSOVO teams in the process of embedding desistance into practice, we developed these resources to help MOSOVOs encourage people with sexual convictions towards the process of change and long-term desistance. That said, we recognise there are some people, who despite criminal sanctions and opportunities of support, remain intent and motivated to sexually offend. Strategies for people motivated in this way, will always require monitoring, control and containment approaches. While we believe, with appropriate support, all people can make positive changes in their life, we recognise if there is ever a conflict between a desistance and risk management approach, public protection will always take precedence.

METHOD

All work was approved by the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (Ref No: 24/PSY/049). We used participatory action research to undertake this work (Seal, 2018). This provided an inclusive approach which enabled us to draw on the knowledge of key stakeholders, as well as help to work *with*, rather than *gaze into* this space (Telep et al., 2020). Stakeholders included MOSOVO officers, police management and people with sexual convictions. By working with people most impacted by the MOSOVO teams, especially people with lived experiences of sexual offending, we were able to learn from their 'real world' insights; and our collaborative approach allowed them to share with us how they might best be supported in their process of desistance (Brierley, 2023). We experienced some of the expected challenges reported by fellow criminological academics (see Lane et al., 2004) when undertaking participatory action research in a correctional context (i.e. needing to build trust fast, navigating the limitations of a secure setting, and working with vulnerable participants) however, these challenges were mitigated through clear and regular communication across the research team. To support the process, a Theory of Change (ToC) was developed by the research team. The ToC method is a valuable collaborative tool to help visualise and formalise concepts being examined while also helping to advance changes needed (Doherty et al., 2022). From this point, we facilitated three stages of consultation (see blue boxes in Fig 1) to gain feedback from key stakeholders to refine the resources.

Figure 1. Process chart



Focus group one: We invited MOSOVOs from each of the three Lancashire Constabulary units to attend a hybrid consultation session with the research team. Sessions were held during working hours, in a meeting room at police headquarters. Use of a hybrid format helped facilitate attendance. In the two-hour session with 13 MOSOVOs we introduced the project, summarised what desistance is, gave a summary of the ToC and then facilitated a discussion. We asked MOSOVOs to think about what they might need to help them work in a more desistance focussed way. After some discussion, MOSOVOs highlighted the need for desistance training and opportunities to develop their supervisory skills; and a resource that might help them focus on desistance factors to track the progress of people they were supervising.

Resource development: The research team held three face-to-face development days and several online sessions to draft the resources ahead of the second consultation event. By drawing on the desistance literature and our previous work and experiences in this space see (Kewley et al., 2020; Kewley and Brereton, 2022; Kewley and Burke, 2023; Pemberton et al., 2023; Mydlowski & Turner Moore 2023; Mydlowski et al., 2024; Pemberton and Kewley, 2025) we developed the following resources:

- Twelve Principles for Assisting Desistance
- Desistance Management Plan
- Desistance Practice Framework

Focus group two: We again invited MOSOVOs from each of the three units to attend this second consultation session. Ideally, we would have preferred the same participants from group one but due to operational commitments, rest days etc. it was not possible to coordinate this; six people attended. In this session, we went over the research project and ToC again, as some participants were not at the first session, and then presented the drafted documents ahead of a group discussion. Prior to the discussion we sent a copy of the resources, as pre-reading, to support a richer discussion. We prepared some prompts and open-ended discussion questions to generate discussion. Feedback again was positive. No major changes were requested to the Twelve Principles for Assisting Desistance, but the Desistance Management Plan required some extra work in terms of operationalising it for MOSOVOs.

One to one consultation with people with sexual convictions: We undertook seven one-to-one discussions with adults convicted of a sexual offence and living in Lancashire. Six were male and one female, average age was 44 ($SD = 17.96$) they had been managed by Lancashire Constabulary on average for 9 years ($SD = 5.4$) and had convictions for rape (of an adult female); making, possession and distribution of indecent images of a child; Causing/inciting a male child under 13 to engage in sexual activity; Causing/inciting/prostitution of/pornography involving a child

under 13; and voyeurism. In terms of their risk levels as determined by their ARMS assessment, three were assessed as Low Risk; two Medium Risk; and two High Risk.

Participants were recruited via the MOSOVOs who spoke with potential participants about the project and provided those interested with a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form. Potential participants were given over a week to consider if they wished to take part, the first authors' contact details was also provided for those wishing to discuss the project prior to agreeing to take part; one person telephoned the first author with questions but then subsequently agreed to be interviewed. Discussions were held in a private room at their local police station, travel arrangements to and from the venue were arranged between the MOSOVO and the participant, travel costs were covered by Lancashire Constabulary. The interviewers (authors one and three) went over the information sheet allowing time for further questions, collected verbal and signed consent from participants. Discussions were undertaken without the presence of any MOSOVO. No incentives were given for participation and with consent each discussion was audio recorded.

Interviewers followed a semi-structured schedule which included an introduction of the concept of desistance, followed by a discussion centered on the drafted Twelve Principles for Assisting Desistance and the Desistance Management Plan. Participants were not asked about their own experiences of being managed by the police (or any other criminal justice agency) this was made clear in the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form, instead participants were invited to express their views and perceptions of the resources presented to them. Despite this several people still volunteered their own lived experiences to highlight points they were making, these included times when offender managers practice was both positive and 'desistance focussed' as well as those times when they were not. Indeed, as was to be expected, participants had mixed experiences of the criminal justice system and gave plenty of examples of practice that would not be recognised as conducive to promoting desistance. Participants were de-briefed at the end of the discussion with two being signposted to services that provide support for adult survivors of child sexual abuse. Again, information about childhood experiences was not sought, but through discussion, reports of childhood sexual abuse were made.

Following these consultations and feedback from participants, a final process was undertaken to update and refine resources. These were then presented to Lancashire Constabulary. Prior to outlining the Twelve Principles for Assisting Desistance, it is important to note that the consultation process described here underpins the development of a set of resources that will be piloted across four constabularies in England and Wales. Accordingly, this case study captures the formative phase of this ongoing work.

DESISTANCE PRINCIPLES

The desistance principles should be deployed in conjunction with the implementation of the Desistance Practice Framework (for a full description of the framework and underpinning theory (see Cain et al. 2026). The framework aims to support police policy and practice in the prevention of sexual reoffending. Indeed, it complements the work undertaken by MOSOVOs helping them carry out robust, comprehensive and balanced risk assessment. The Framework aligns various police strategies including the National Policing Prevention Strategy (CD3 Secondary prevention and CD4 Tertiary Prevention) and Policing Violence Against Women and Girls – The National Framework for Delivery: 2024 – 2027 and engage actively in professional curiosity and strategic investigative thinking (Gehl & Plecas, 2017). Drawing on our knowledge of the desistance literature and the consultation process with key stakeholders, we agreed the following twelve principles should be adopted by police constabularies committed to embedding desistance approaches in the work of MOSOVO supervisors. The principles are not hierarchical, but instead mutually support each other. Figure 2 provides a summary of each principle.

Figure 2. Twelve Principles for Assisting Desistance

PRINCIPLES

Recognise desistance approaches reduce risk: To engage in desistance practice MOSOVO officers and other police professionals supporting their work must recognise the value of adopting desistance approaches. It is essential they subscribe to a value base that recognises the role desistance approaches can play in reducing risk and reoffending. While traditional rehabilitation models like the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model (Andrews & Bonta, 2016) are effective, these models primarily aim to reduce and manage the risk of sexual recidivism, rather than enhance the individual's quality of life (Chu & Ward, 2015). Solely focusing on

criminogenic risk factors—though important—is unlikely, on its own, to motivate or sustain desistance.

Recognise all as members of society, with rights, responsibilities: MOSOVOs should recognise people convicted of sexual offending as equal members of society, with rights, responsibilities. They have agency and self-determination; however, they require support to achieve goals and contribute to society (Ward & Connolly, 2008).

Promote meaningful relationships and access to purposeful activity: MOSOVOs must understand people do not exist in the world in a vacuum; meaningful, and positive social relationships and purposeful activities are essential to promote connection and help people create new social roles, strengthen new identities (Healy, 2012) and increase social capital potential. Promoting and advocating for meaningful relationships and support access to purposeful activity can make positive changes that will reduce risk and increase desistance from offending.

Promote the reconstruction of positive social identities: Desistance involves identity transformation; people need to shift from seeing themselves as an "offender" to a non-offending self. This is reinforced by others' acceptance (Maruna, 2001). Support from formal agents, like MOSOVOs, can strengthen self-efficacy and promote lasting change (de Vel-Palumbo et al., 2023). MOSOVOs should therefore promote the reconstruction of positive social identities and provide people convicted of sexual offending opportunities to showcase change.

Recognise impact of adverse life experiences: People with sexual convictions often experience poor mental health (Lussier et al., 2024) and have had several adverse life experiences (Kahn et al., 2021), much of which goes undiagnosed and untreated. MOSOVOs should adopt a welfare-focused approach (Mann et al., 2019) to help the person address/manage these through advocacy, signposting, and/or coaching.

Work collaboratively: MOSOVOs should work collaboratively with people convicted of sexual offending; the commitment to the desistance process should be a shared activity. Embracing a sense of collectivism, will foster a sense of 'we'; a collaborative relationship, works 'with' the person rather than doing things 'to' them (Ward & Maruna, 2007).

Adopt desistance approaches regardless of risk/offence type: Desistance approaches should be adopted by the MOSOVO with all people convicted of sexual offending, regardless of risk/offence type and stages of the desistance process. Working motivationally and supporting strengths, even pre-desistance, can increase the likelihood of change (Ward & Stewart, 2003).

Recognise the impact of intersectionality and power differences: Feelings of powerlessness to achieve positive personal goals will reinforce a belief of being *doomed to deviance* (Maruna, 2001) and impede the desistance process. MOSOVOs must be sensitive to the diversity and protective characteristics of people they supervise.

The explicit and implicit power differences within their relationship will impact how they can assist desistance.

Engage in appropriate training and supervision: To support Creedons' (2023) call for desistance focused practice far greater training and support in this space is needed. MOSOVOs must engage and receive appropriate desistance training and regular clinical supervision to help improve outcomes for the people they supervise.

Work with transparency and hope: Hope is essential to the desistance process. People must believe their life goals are achievable and that a path to success exists (Snyder et al., 2000). But, past offending or criminal justice sanctions often hinder access to core life domains (Levins & Mjåland, 2021); MOSOVOs should work transparently and in response to changes in risk and need by adopting an individualised and collaborative approach when working with people convicted of sexual offending.

*Use person centred, de-stigmatising language***:** MOSOVOs should use person-centred language when working with people attempting to desist from crime, as this supports all stages of the desistance process (D. A. Harris, 2021). Avoiding stigmatising labels (e.g., "sex offender") and instead focusing on describing behaviors (e.g., "sexual abuse") helps shift the narrative towards positive change (Willis, 2018).

Embedded desistance force wide: Building trust to help promote desistance takes time, therefore, desistance approaches should be recognised, understood and embedded force wide. This will help colleagues unintentionally undermining the work of MOSOVOs.

In presenting our work in this case study, we outline the *Twelve Principles for Assisting Desistance.* We note however, this work is preliminary in nature. We have commenced piloting these principles, along with our Desistance Practice Framework (Cain et al., 2026) across four police constabularies. Further work will be undertaken to empirically examine the utility and effectiveness of these resources. We also make several recommendations in support of the findings of the Creedon (2023) review. In particular, we call on the College of Policing to review current training guidance to local areas for police professionals working with people with sexual convictions. Specifically, we recommend that desistance-focussed content be incorporated into the *Introduction to managing sexual offenders and violent offenders* training package and offered as a continuing professional development module for staff who have already completed this course. Finally, we suggest that the College of Policing update the *Authorised Professional Practice* resource to reflect and integrate our Desistance Practice Framework.

CONCLUSION

The recidivism rate of people with sexual convictions is low compared to other offence types, and desistance appears to be the norm (Hanson, 2018). Even people assessed as high risk of reconviction, can go on to desist and lead offence free lives (Hanson et al, 2014; Hanson et al., 2018), although the risk of recidivism may increase over time (Lussier et al., 2025). With more people with sexual convictions under extended police supervision (Kewley & Karsna, 2025), MOSOVOs play a critical role in supporting desistance, reducing risk and protecting the public. Focusing on strengths is as important as focussing on risk (Thornton, 2024), since reinforcing protective factors and developing personal capacities, reduces reoffending; goal-oriented interventions are generally more engaging and motivational than purely risk-reduction activities (Mann et al., 2004). One example of a successful desistance-focused intervention is Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) as illustrated by Richards (2021). This community-based intervention fosters accountability, reintegration, and identity transformation. CoSA professionals are integrated into broader criminal justice and community systems, but critically they provide people with sexual convictions consistent opportunities for personal growth and social reintegration.

That said, the desistance process is complex and can be easily derailed, often being impeded by criminal justice systems, which as observed across many international contexts (including England and Wales) are not always conducive to desistance (Farrall, 2021). The literature underpinning our theoretical understanding of this process equally requires further development. In particular, drawing on international comparisons would strengthen our knowledge base. For example greater clarity is needed regarding the mechanisms that mediate support (Lenkens et al., 2024), the validity of protective factors (Garant & Ouellet, 2024), the cultural challenges individuals face (Farrall et al., 2025), the differences between those with heightened risk profiles (Netten & Wakeling, 2025) and crucially, the role of formal agents in the process of desistance (Villeneuve et al., 2021).

Thus, in an effort to help contribute to this growing body of work and to support MOSOVOs and police constabularies better exploit opportunities in current practice to assist people into a process of desistance, we have presented here twelve principles that, in conjunction with our Desistance Practice Framework, should guide MOSOVO practice. Despite resource challenges, MOSOVOs are extremely well positioned to serve as formal agents of change and promote desistance with people with sexual convictions. Indeed, by adopting desistance-focused approaches and interventions they can target the underlying drivers of sexual violence which in turn, will help to prevent future sexual reoffending.

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ENDNOTES

1 Within police constabularies in England and Wales, the term MOSOVO is used to denote both individual officers and the specialist public protection units to which they are assigned.

2 A collaboration between Liverpool John Moores University, Lancashire Constabulary, Birmingham City University, University of Central Lancashire and the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse