



Carefully and humanely progressing responsible and ethical digitisation in probation

Dr Victoria Knight

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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr Victoria Knight, providing a guide for responsible and ethical digitisation in probation, recognising that there are significant risks of digital poverty and exclusion for justice-experienced people. The guidance and recommendations align to the evidence base in relation to recovery and justice capital, digital rehabilitation, and digital desistance, all of which advocate a holistic and human-centred approach. To transform probation services into equitable, digitally-mature environments and to support a broader digital recovery ecosystem – encompassing the individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels – there are a number of critical requirements. These include developing digital resources based on needs and rights, supporting co-production and collaborative approaches, building a range of partnerships, integrating evaluation mechanisms, and developing leaders who understand and can progress the agenda. In addition, ethical scaffolding is essential; digitisation must balance opportunities for rehabilitation with safety and inclusivity while ensuring fairness and transparency. The overall goal is to reduce digital exclusion, enhance human interactions, and foster societal integration.



Dr Robin Moore

Head of Research & Data Analysis

Author profile

Dr Victoria Knight is Associate Professor of Research at De Montfort University, UK. She is an international expert on digital rehabilitation in prison settings. Her sociological work explores how people in the criminal justice system interact with digital technologies. Her recent work on digital rehabilitation in prisons commissioned by the United Nations (UNICRI) outlines different approaches and practical ethical guidance. She is widely published on the topic of digital prisons and acts as an advisor and consultant for government agencies, NGOs and digital developers across national and international settings on digitization of justice.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of
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1. Introduction

This Academic Insights paper is intended to provide a guide for practice and policy, helping all to understand the kinds of practical steps and activities needed to help support people on probation *with* digital resources as a means to nourish their desistance journeys. The digitization of the justice sector is complicated, and at times fraught with tensions and anxiety, and it shines a light on important factors like human rights, equality and safety. Slowly evidence is emerging that identifies some of the beneficial outcomes for people on probation – especially where digital resources can help improve human flourishing in different ways. In addition, staff are crucial in the digitization journey and are important brokers in empowering probationers to live a life without crime and reduce their risk of reoffending, now in a digitized world.

The paper focuses on digital resources and services for people on probation that can implicitly or explicitly support, initiate and facilitate their desistance. Key recommendations include:

Centring recovery and rights

Provide digital resources tailored to individual needs, enabling self-improvement and community reintegration

Balancing safety and access

Use technology responsibly to enhance security while supporting privacy and equity

Building evaluation mechanisms

Apply continuous monitoring and feedback to ensure tools remain effective and user-centred

Collaborative practices

Foster partnerships with technology providers, NGOs, and communities to innovate and expand services

Leadership and inclusion

Develop leaders who prioritise desistance-focused digital strategies, ensuring staff and service user inclusion

These measures aim to transform probation services into equitable, digitally-capable environments, addressing justice gaps and fostering societal integration.

2. An ethical digital recovery model

2.1 The context in a digital world

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures, known as the *Tokyo Rules* (1991), provide a framework to promote alternatives to imprisonment and ensure fair and humane treatment of offenders. The principles aim to reduce over-reliance on incarceration while prioritising rehabilitation and reintegration into society. They emphasise proportionality, human dignity, and social reintegration, advocating using detention as a last resort, tailoring measures to individual circumstances, and fostering community involvement. The principles highlight fairness, accountability, and adherence to international human rights standards, prioritising rehabilitation over punitive approaches.

However, the rules do not yet consider or document how these standards translate to a digital world. A small number of human rights focused efforts have begun to engage and respond to the intersection of justice issues and digitisation. However, there are gaps and this highlights potential risks to all in a digital society. Existing recommendations and guidance mean that human rights standards have yet to embed these fully into existing protocols, policy and legislation. It seems there is an urgent need for concrete directives to protect people in and working within criminal justice situated in a digital world more broadly.

There are competing ideas and evidence about the digitization of probation (and prisons). The digitization of probation has predominantly focused on the role and efficacy of electronic monitoring (Belur et al., 2020) and more recently tracking, monitoring and attendance using devices like mobile phones (Goodley and Pearson, 2023; Taylor et al., 2022). Much less attention has been paid to the role of technology as a tool for people on probation to support their rehabilitation and even less so in respect to their desistance (Knight et al., 2023). However recent developments, largely propelled by the effects of Covid-19, have shifted working practices and, more generally, social interactions with digital as a normalised part of everyday life.

The justice sector and its people do experience digital poverty, with justice-experienced people at significant risk of digital exclusion (Reisdorf and DeCook, 2022). Investment and organisational capability can explain some of this, as can attitudes and negative perceptions, as well as digital skills and competencies (UNICRI, 2024). This presents our criminal justice sector with a number of challenges – the digital deficit is now hampering progress and the ability of our public services to perform and equip those that they serve in a digital world. Transformation and modernisation can be an opportunity to revisit core values of services like probation and reflect deeply about their priorities and working practices.

At the beating heart of this debate, it should be recognised that any responses will fare better if they are people-centred by meeting needs of beneficiaries, thereby advocating ethical practice and behaviours (Van De Steene and Knight, 2017). This includes all beneficiaries and not just people on probation – staff, associated partners such as educators, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), probationers' families, employers, digital developers, policymakers, and of course the wider public. Given this perspective of human centredness, this paper will not provide a list of technologies per se and report on their efficacy and impact on baseline offending. This is futile and not necessarily what evidence-based driven organisations wish to hear. It is not about a digital intervention directly reducing risk, but about how our interactions with digital can impact human relationships, identity, skills and citizenship. This demands an

ethical model to secure human rights and opportunities, which in turn lends itself to those wider efforts to reduce social harm.

2.2 Informing the model

In shaping a practice-focused approach, it is worth setting out the key models that help us to understand and evaluate the context of people on and in the probation service with digital. In doing so, it is then possible to map a digital recovery model for people within probation. This is informed by a constellation of growing evidence from research and practice, notably:

- digital rehabilitation
- digital desistance
- recovery and justice capital.

All of these models advocate a holistic and human-centred approach.

Desistance, recovery and justice capital are interrelated concepts in rehabilitation and reintegration (see [Academic Insights paper 2022/10](#) by Kemshall and McCartan). **Desistance** refers to the process of individuals ceasing criminal behaviour and reintegrating into society, prioritising personal change and the founding of pro-social identities. Recovery capital plays a pivotal role in supporting desistance, encompassing the social, human, physical, and cultural resources which individuals draw upon to overcome barriers and lead crime-free lives.

Recovery capital includes

- social capital: support networks and connections that foster positive relationships and opportunities
- human capital: skills, resilience, and aspirations for a better life
- physical capital: financial resources and tangible assets enabling stability
- cultural capital: values and beliefs promoting conformity and social integration.

Justice capital highlights the role of justice systems and practitioners in enabling access to these resources. It stresses fair and compassionate practices, trauma-informed approaches, and institutional support to reduce structural inequalities and provide equitable opportunities for rehabilitation. By aligning justice capital with recovery capital, interventions can promote trust, dignity, and effective pathways for individuals to build sustainable, offence-free lives. These frameworks advocate for holistic, multi-level approaches addressing *individual, community, and societal* factors to create meaningful and lasting desistance outcomes. Digital has a significant role in enhancing and securing recovery and justice capital.

Digital rehabilitation refers to the use of digital technologies to deliver rehabilitative services to individuals, supporting their reintegration into society post-release or during supervision within community sanctions (Reisdorf and Rikard, 2018). It encompasses diverse applications such as digital education, vocational training, behaviour change programmes, re-entry tools, and communication platforms, all aimed at equipping people with the necessary skills and resources for a law-abiding life. Grounded in ethical and human rights principles, digital rehabilitation prioritises accessibility, agency, and equality.

Digital rehabilitation addresses digital inequality by providing justice-experienced people with opportunities to gain digital literacy, improve employability, and access essential services, which are critical in today's technology-driven society. Programmes often include virtual learning environments, tele-health services, and tools for maintaining family and community connections. Digital rehabilitation also seeks to normalise probation and prison conditions by mirroring societal digital practices while mitigating risks such as data security and misuse. It

can offer a cost-effective, flexible alternative to traditional rehabilitation methods, fostering personal growth, reducing recidivism, and preparing people for a successful transition out of the justice system. Deploying digital resources and competencies can help nurture recovery and justice capital. These are not intended to replace offline supports but instead enhance, adapt and compliment other services.

Digital desistance refers to leveraging digital technologies to support the process of individuals ceasing criminal behaviour and reintegrating into society (Morris and Graham, 2019; Knight et al., 2024). It focuses on providing access to tools and digital literacy training that empowers individuals to rebuild their identities, gain employment, manage personal affairs, and connect with pro-social networks. Unlike traditional rehabilitation, digital desistance emphasises active participation and self-responsibility, using technology to create pathways for personal growth and societal reintegration.

This approach aligns with broader societal goals, enabling justice-involved individuals to navigate a digital world. It includes initiatives like digital learning platforms, online recovery tools, and virtual reality (VR) based training that fosters cognitive and emotional growth. By addressing digital inequality, digital desistance helps reduce the stigma of incarceration (Seo et al., 2020), supports mental health and addiction (Davies et al., 2017), and facilitates smooth re-entry into communities (Gurusami, 2019). However, its success relies on ethical implementation, needs-based design, and collaboration among justice institutions, technology providers, and society to ensure equitable access and meaningful outcomes.

2.3 Translating the model into practice

A pathway towards a digital recovery model demands ethical scaffolding (UNICRI, 2024; Knight and Van De Steene, 2020). Table 1 provides a structure to align theoretical principles with practical examples that demonstrate their application in real-world scenarios.

Table 1: Applied principles of ethical digital practice in justice recovery

| Principle | Description | Digital solutions & support |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Harmful to deprive | Use technology to mitigate the harms of imprisonment or community sanctions and reduce social pain and poverty | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailored eRecovery Apps • Connecting to services, staff and families |
| Prepare | Provide digital resources to prepare individuals for recovery, fostering identity change, self-worth, and confidence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital workplace skills and training using e-learning and VR for immersion in workplace training experiences |
| Normalise | Normalise digital use to nurture social interactions, build healthy intimate bonds, autonomy, and supportive networks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to improve digital literacy, access and connectivity • Responsible and safe use • Digital resilience |
| Restorative | Enrich skills and foster social interactions through technology to create therapeutic and nourishing experiences | <p>Online therapy opportunities i.e.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interventions • Connecting to peer mentors and recovery communities through video calls |

| Principle | Description | Digital solutions & support |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Human rights | Ensure fair access to technology and develop strategies for safe and responsible digital use to protect human interests | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data protection and rights • Digital resilience and wellbeing • Establishing a needs-based approach • Equality – fair and safe access and connectivity |

To establish an ethical digital recovery ecosystem, probation services are encouraged to adopt the following practices:

- 1. Needs-centred design:** actively and routinely assess user needs (e.g., gender, age, neurodiversity) to tailor digital tools for recovery (UNICRI, 2024).
 - *Why:* Aligned resources improve engagement and reduce inequality (Järveläinen and Rantanen, 2024).
- 2. Routine evaluation and feedback:** use surveys and focus groups to refine digital tools continuously and assess training needs.
 - *Why:* ensures tools remain effective and user-focused (Hofinger and Pflegerl, 2024).
- 3. Co-production, co-creation and co-delivery:** collaborate with users and stakeholders in designing digital platforms and content (Morris and Bans, 2018).
 - *Why:* builds desistance qualities such as trust and creates practical, accessible and meaningful solutions (Morris and Johns, 2024).
- 4. Partnerships:** partner with technology providers, NGOs, training services and government agencies (Ross et al., 2023).
 - *Why:* enhances innovation, access, and service delivery, whilst accessing experts in niche practices (Farley and Ware, 2023).
- 5. Leadership for change:** cultivate leaders who champion desistance-focused digital strategies.
 - *Why:* drives cultural shifts and embeds ethical practices (UNICRI, 2024; Knight et al., 2022).
- 6. Inclusion and equity:** provide digital skills training and ensure access for all users (UNICRI, 2024).
 - *Why:* reduces disparities and supports reintegration (Taylor and Bartels, 2024; Reisdorf and DeCook, 2021).
- 7. Safeguards and ethics:** implement safety protocols and ethical guidelines.
 - *Why:* builds trust and ensures responsible technology use (UNICRI, 2024).

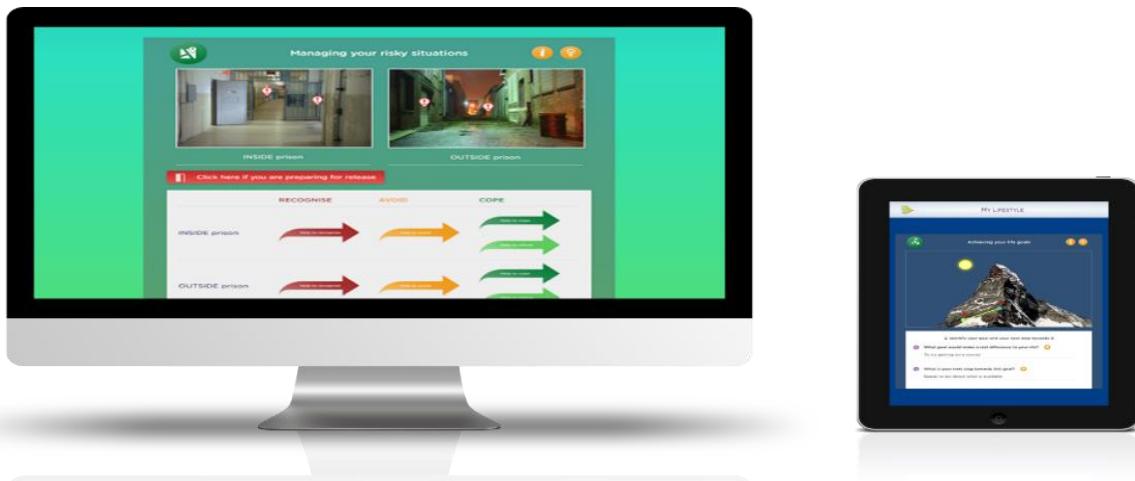
2.4 A digital recovery ecosystem

This model demands probation and justice services to undertake and commit to a number of operational activities in order to ethically and carefully digitally mature not only their service, but provide safe and realistic resources and support for people in their care. Kemshall and McCartan's (2022) ecosystem for desistance is helpful in targeting need and identifying how digital resources can enhance or adapt existing practice. This focuses on the *individual, interpersonal, community and societal* as spheres in which digital recovery can be mobilised. Examples to illustrate this are described below.

Individual: digital tools support personal growth by enabling pro-social behaviours, improving relationships, and accessing culturally relevant resources. Effective use requires a needs-first approach, consistent exposure, and relatable instruction. Digital tools can foster routines, empower self-quantification, and provide meaningful connections. Key commitments include universal digital skills training, centring individual aspirations, and eradicating access gaps in treatment, therapy and social care.

Example: *Breaking Free Online – Addiction Treatment and Recovery*

[Breaking Free Online](#) (BFO) is a computer-assisted therapy (CAT) programme for addressing drug and alcohol dependence in UK and US community settings and prisons. Based on cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), it targets substance misuse, mental health issues, and offending behaviours, reducing risks of overdose and reoffending. Originally developed for community settings, it is also available in prisons. This service offers users an insight into their recovery journey via tracking of things like mood, triggers and achievements. It allows users to set goals and learn about coping skills and emotion management (Elison-Davies et al., 2022). This programme has been accredited by HM Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) and the service is also available as an App¹.



¹ The app is not directly supported by probation services at present. Instead, people who may be supported by probation in the community can access this through health and social care services.

Interpersonal: human connection is essential for recovery and desistance. Digital tools can enhance communication, co-produce resources, and build pro-social networks. This requires providing communication technologies, brokering safe relationships, and celebrating personal change through digital platforms.

Example: *Changing Lives* Mobile Phone App

The [Changing Lives app](#), provided by the Probation Board of Northern Ireland, supports rehabilitation and desistance for individuals on supervised orders (probation, juvenile justice, or community service). The app was developed through users of justice services in order to identify needs and accessibility (McGreevy, 2017). It offers resources on court orders, tracking obligations, and appointment management, as well as victim support advice. The app includes mental health resources, such as GP and mental health service contacts, anxiety and depression management advice, and links to local online support. It also features behaviour change tools like an alcohol diary, self-assessment, resilience-building advice, and a messaging service for probation officers or helplines. This digital platform enhances interactions between service staff and people on probation and also for victims (Montgomery, 2019).



Community: civic participation fosters self-worth and reintegration. Digital tools enable access to supportive networks and bridge the digital divide by facilitating education, recovery, and employment. Key actions include building partnerships, creating online spaces for prosocial communities, and rewarding civic contributions.

Example: Co-producing digital solutions together

Nurturing community participation for justice-experienced people can be challenging, but not insurmountable. Practitioners can assist this enterprise by adopting a co-production approach (Cunningham and Wakeling, 2022). This involves working with people to find solutions and create accessible and meaningful content intended for their own communities. Evidence highlights that this kind of approach can be effective in stimulating recovery. Findings from research also suggest co-producing citizens can help advocate for ethical co-production practices and the need for services to include 'experts by experience' in justice organisations to foster a learning culture that centres user needs and minimises harm (Morris and Haider, 2022). Examples of this include the development of digital animation clips to support CBT-based interventions (Morris and Bans, 2018), such as those for men who have committed Intimate Partner Violence (Morris et al., 2021).

Societal: society's response to crime must adopt a public health approach, addressing trauma and disadvantage. Digital tools help share positive messages, educate the public, and support acceptance of rehabilitation. This demands partnerships with technology companies, co-produced narratives, public education, and frameworks to ensure safe and secure use of digital tools in justice settings. Conduits to positive frameworks with the justice sector about recovery can be championed by practitioners (Muffarreh et al., 2022).

Example: *E-Learning- Digital Recovery, Rights, Opportunities*

Acquiring not only digital skills but understanding the range of benefits, challenges and ethical dimensions of quality digital resources for people in the criminal justice system is important for staff. There is a range of accessible resources available to practitioners that can contribute to staff widening their skills and professional knowledge. Two examples include The Council of Europe's [HELP online courses](#) and DigiCor's *Digital Transition in Corrections Awareness Course*². DigiCor for example also offers a train-the-trainer model to help generate peer-to-peer support, positive digital change and extending digital literacy as well as centring recovery in on and offline interactions. Justice leaders, staff and partners have a significant role in championing positive change – shaped by staying informed.



² Hosted by the [Corrections Learning Academy | Terms of Service \(talentlms.com\)](#)

3. Conclusion

The pace of digital transformation within the probation service is a paradox. In keeping abreast and ensuring ethical safeguards, in what feels like lightning speed developments, against a plethora of challenges and risks to services and its people, there is significant effort to protect the interests of all (CEP, 2024). Equally, change can take a long time, especially when services are under-resourced and responding to complex human problems. One such response to mitigate these challenges is the recent publication of the Council of Europe's recommendations³ for the use of Artificial Intelligence in prisons and probation (CoE, 2024). In addition, models of working practices are responding to blended and hybrid methods – such as use of video calls and chatbots (CEP, 2024). In day-to-day practice however, as outlined in this Academic Insights paper, there can be some careful collective efforts to help tackle inequality, fairness and harness citizenship in a digital world. Making digital and recovery happen is not straightforward and resources are not easy to come by.

To conclude, the overall approaches to harness careful and humane digital recovery would benefit from:

- centring recovery, dignity, equality and transparency of providing and delivering digital resources based on needs and rights – human decision-making supports journeys of recovery and digital enhances human interactions
- balancing recovery opportunities with safety, risk and security in socially inclusive ways – this includes the rights to privacy and data protection
- building in continuous evaluation to build rigorous evidence of digital recovery outcomes.

Progressing digital transformation in probation demands a human-centred approach that prioritises recovery, dignity, and equity. Ethical digitisation must balance opportunities for rehabilitation with safety and inclusivity while ensuring fairness and transparency. By embedding continuous evaluation and fostering partnerships, probation services can build rigorous, evidence-based frameworks that enhance human interactions and reduce digital exclusion, empowering people on probation to reintegrate successfully.

³ [CM/Rec\(2024\)5](#)

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1st Floor Civil Justice Centre
1 Bridge Street West
Manchester
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The HM Inspectorate of Probation Research & Data Analysis Team can be contacted via
HMIPProbationResearch@hmiprobation.gov.uk

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