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A Multi-Site Qualitative Evaluation of the Accredited Thinking Skills Programme (TSP)

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1. Summary

The evidence for offending behaviour programmes has expanded over several decades, with a large body of reviews producing well replicated findings attesting to the positive effects of cognitive-behavioural approaches in reducing general reoffending. These approaches aim to help participants recognise patterns of thought and action, while providing alternative perspectives and cognitive skills to help change thinking and behaviour. Related research also indicates that following Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) principles yields the best outcomes. In brief, RNR principles suggest that the intensity of rehabilitation services should be matched to a person's propensity to reoffend (*risk*), targeted at psychological characteristics associated with reoffending (*need*); and, based on a cognitive-behavioural approach, tailored to individual styles of learning (*responsivity*). In line with such principles, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in England and Wales has invested in cognitive-behavioural programmes since the 1990s. Central to this offer since 2008 has been the Thinking Skills Programme (TSP), which is aimed at adult men and women who are assessed as medium and above risk of reoffending. TSP comprises 19 sessions (15 group sessions and 4 individual sessions). It is designed to support reductions in reoffending in four ways as set out below.

1. Developing thinking skills (such as problem solving, flexible thinking, consequential thinking, critical reasoning).
2. Applying these skills to managing personal risk factors.
3. Applying thinking skills to developing personally relevant protective factors.
4. Applying thinking skills to setting pro-social goals that support relapse prevention.

This report qualitatively evaluates TSP, focusing on participants' experiences of the programme and the perceived impact of the prison environment on its effectiveness.

The Qualitative Evaluation

The Centre for Applied Social Sciences Policy Practice and Research (CASSPPR) at the University of Derby was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to conduct a qualitative evaluation of TSP delivered in prisons. Several large-scale quantitative

evaluations have been carried out on TSP, but there is less research that has focused on participant experiences, their engagement with the programme and their ability to apply learning in everyday life. Using a broad and inclusive sample, varying in age and ethnicity, this qualitative research aimed to explore the views and experiences of male and female TSP participants focusing on:

- understanding and exploring experiences of TSP, including the learning and skills acquired from the programme and their application in real life;
- participants' readiness for TSP and level of engagement;
- responsivity considerations, including participants' feelings of safety within the group, the quality of therapeutic relationships, sense of inclusion, and personal relevance; and,
- the role of the prison environment in providing opportunities to practice and develop skills learned from TSP.

Data Collection

This study was a large-scale multi-prison qualitative evaluation of TSP. Data was gathered from 50 in-depth face-to-face interviews with male and female adults who had completed the programme. The interviews were semi-structured. They took place across eight prisons and lasted approximately one hour each. The interviews focused on participants' TSP journey, their decision to engage, and their experiences during and after the programme. Interview topics included motivation, relationships, responsivity, personal relevance, enablers and barriers to participating, impact of the prison environment, and the application of learning.

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved detailed readings of the transcripts, initial and systematic coding, generating themes, and reviewing themes for consistency with the coding and qualitative data. Inter-coder agreement verified the coding, enhancing the robustness of the findings.

Study approach limitations and interpretation of findings

Although the sample size achieved can be considered large for a qualitative study, it should be noted that participants were identified by practitioners at each site and were not randomly selected. Therefore, a degree of caution should be applied when interpreting the

findings as they may not be representative of all TSP participants or the different types of participants (e.g., sex, gender identity, younger or older individuals, ethnic groups, neurotypes, and those that did not complete TSP).

Key findings

The qualitative analysis highlighted five main themes, which are set out below.

- **Groundwork to Cultivate Change:** Participants' readiness for change was intricately linked to internally driven motivations, often arising from pivotal life moments such as family commitments or personal maturity. Externally driven motivations such as sentence plans or parole requirements can mean that completing TSP is perceived by some participants as a form of 'box ticking' and can lead to disengagement. These findings highlight the dynamic interplay between internal and situational factors, emphasising the need for appropriate timing in selecting people onto TSP.
- **Facilitators of Change:** The role of programme facilitators was critical in creating genuine, reciprocal relationships that fostered trust and openness. Facilitators who showed genuine interest and actively listened to participants helped build trust and engagement. Tailored delivery methods, such as visual aids and interactive techniques, enhanced understanding and retention of programme material, promoting a supportive and inclusive environment essential for personal change and development.
- **Seeing Life Through a New Lens:** Through structured TSP exercises, participants experienced a profound reassessment of their worldviews and future aspirations. These exercises helped participants gain new perspectives on past experiences, allowing them to disconnect from harmful relationships and set realistic goals for personal development. Future-focused goal setting instilled hope and resilience, and emphasised the transformative potential of cognitive change within cognitive-behavioural programmes such as TSP.
- **Applying Learning, Reflections, and 'Doing' Change:** The practical application of TSP skills within the prison environment was a crucial indicator of success. Participants demonstrated the ability to regulate their emotions and engage in rational decision-making during high-stress situations, effectively resisting

engaging in prison violence and disturbances. External validation from peers and staff reinforced these changes, supporting ongoing rehabilitation.

- **Context Hampering Change:** Despite the evident benefits of TSP, various barriers within the broader prison context seemed to hinder participants' progress and programme effectiveness. Reported concerns about participant confidentiality, inconsistent staff support beyond TSP, and the lack of broader structural support post-completion posed significant challenges to engagement and skill retention. Addressing these barriers is crucial for maximising TSP's effectiveness and supporting participants' rehabilitation and desistance goals.

Conclusions

Overall, through an in-depth exploration of TSP participants' lived experiences, this qualitative evaluation found that TSP was perceived to be delivered by engaged and interested staff and useful to participants in helping them develop skills for change. Findings must be considered in light of the methodological limitations set out above.

This qualitative study identified several themes. These related to (1) factors underpinning readiness to engage with the programme; (2) the pivotal role of programme facilitators and relationships in rehabilitation; (3) the process of developing new insights and goals; (4) examples of the utility and application of skills from TSP in participants' lives; (5) and broader issues associated with prisons as a context for rehabilitation. Informed by these themes, this report highlights the following points for consideration to support the effectiveness of rehabilitative programmes and services.

1. **Appropriate Timing:** Ensuring the timing of enrolment onto programmes aligns with individual sentences to foster genuine motivation and readiness for meaningful engagement.
2. **Facilitator Support:** Facilitators should continue to focus on building genuine, supportive relationships with participants to create a trusting and open environment for learning.
3. **Ongoing Support:** Providing programme participants with follow-up refreshers, structured interactions and conversations after a programme that help maintain and build on the skills learned.

4. **Addressing Barriers:** Addressing programme participant confidentiality concerns, improving staff support, and ensuring consistent structural support across different prison sites.
5. **Staff Training:** Increase prison staffs' awareness of the need to support pro-social behaviour in everyday interactions to reinforce participant's skills for change.

Overall, these qualitative findings and points for consideration aim to augment the effectiveness of programmes like TSP before, during, and after delivery, by building on existing strengths and ensuring comprehensive support for participants throughout their rehabilitation journey.

2. Introduction and Aims

The evidence for offending behaviour programmes has expanded over several decades, with a large body of international and domestic reviews having produced well replicated findings attesting to the positive effects of cognitive-behavioural approaches in reducing general reoffending (Lösel 1995, Wilson et al., 2005; Lipsey et al., 2007; Papailia et al. 2019; Giesbrecht, 2023; Walton and Elliott, 2024). The term 'cognitive-behavioural' refers to methods from cognitive and behavioural therapies, including behavioural analysis, identifying thinking patterns, and coaching in cognitive skills. More widely, it has been evident since the early 1990s (Andrews et al. 1990a) that the effects of programmes can be optimised when they adhere to principles of human service, known as 'Risk-Need-Responsivity' (RNR). In short, RNR principles indicate that the intensity of rehabilitation services should be matched to a person's risk level, targeted at psychological characteristics associated with reoffending (termed 'criminogenic needs'); and, based on a cognitive-behavioural approach, personalised to styles of learning (Andrews et al. 1990b; see Wormith & Zidenberg 2018 for a review).

His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in England and Wales has been providing cognitive-behavioural programmes as part of its rehabilitative offer for over three decades. A pillar of that offer has been the provision of 'general offending behaviour programmes', also known as 'cognitive-skills programmes' (see McGuire, 2006; Hollin & Palmer, 2009 for prior reviews). In line with RNR, such programmes have been designed for individuals assessed as medium and above risk of reoffending with a range of criminogenic needs including antisocial attitudes, pro-criminal peer relationships and difficulties with self-control. The 'Thinking Skills Programme' (TSP) is a cognitive skills programme delivered in HMPPS. It was provisionally accredited in 2008 and has since been implemented nationally across prisons and probation by HMPPS. In 2010, the programme received full accreditation by the Correctional Services Accreditation and Advice Panel (CSAAP) (see Appendix 1 for a description of CSAAP).

TSP comprises 19 sessions (15 group sessions and 4 individual sessions), providing about 38-hours of contact time divided across three modules (Self-Control, Problem

Solving, and Positive Relationships). The programme is designed to help adult participants (male and female) develop skills in pro-social problem solving, perspective taking, developing, and managing relationships, and self-management. The aim of TSP is to support participants to develop skills which can help stop them from reoffending and encourage a successful, pro-social life. It does this by targeting criminogenic needs to develop participants' ability to manage their emotions, make effective decisions, solve problems, achieve their goals, manage the influence of anti-social relationships, and use pro-social interpersonal skills in their interactions with others.

On three occasions, TSP has been evaluated using a large-scale matched-comparison impact design. Once in the community (Travers, 2016) and twice in prisons (Brinn et al. 2023; Elliott et al. 2023). In each case researchers matched samples of between 10 and 20 thousand TSP participants with comparison groups comprising tens or hundreds of thousands of prisoners or people on probation. In the first study, Travers (2016) found that for men who had met the TSP suitability criteria, starting the programme was associated with a 5-percentage-point reduction in reoffending after two years. Results for women were not statistically significant, though their actual reoffending rate on average was found to be lower than predicted. In the second study, Brinn et al. (2023) reported a 1.7-percentage-point reduction in two-year reoffending for males, and in contrast to Travers, they found a 3.3-percentage-point reduction in two-year reoffending for women who had met the TSP suitability criteria. In addition, Brinn et al. also found that both the male and female TSP groups committed fewer proven reoffences per person than their comparison groups, and for the male TSP group, they reported a longer time to reoffending from the point of release. In the third study, Elliott et al. (2023) evaluated the impact of TSP on prison adjudications using a 6-month follow-up. For males, they found a 2-percentage-point reduction in general adjudications, and a 0.8-percentage-point reduction in adjudications for violence. In addition, both the male and female TSP groups received fewer general adjudications per person than their matched comparison groups.

In addition to these large-scale evaluations, there have been several smaller studies. The first (Barnett, 2011) was a qualitative analysis of seven women's experiences of a TSP pilot. Barnett found that the participants thought TSP and the collaborative style of staff was relevant to their needs, but all described disengaging, and most wished the

programme had been longer. The second study (Oakes 2013; Oakes et al. 2016) was a realist evaluation of another pilot – an adapted version of TSP delivered to 24 adult male prisoners with learning disability and challenges (LDC). Researchers administered two psychometric scales (one measuring locus of control and the other problem-solving), and carried out interviews, and focus groups with staff, managers, and participants. Statistically significant changes were found on both scales, and overall findings confirmed that adapting TSP for people with LDC was feasible. However, the relative success of the pilot was reliant on several aspects of context, including prisons with teams that were motivated to provide the programme and staff who delivered it to a high quality.

The third study (Merola, 2014) was a forerunner to Elliott et al.'s. (2023) evaluation of TSP's impact on prison behaviour. Unlike Elliott et al., however, the study was uncontrolled, and the TSP group was about 70 times smaller (199 young adult males). That said, in addition to prison behaviour, scores from a routine TSP psychometric battery comprising 17 scales were also analysed. Participants' prison behaviour was found to have improved after 6-months, and across the 17 scales, a significant change was found on those measuring impulsivity, offending attitudes, and cognitive indolence. A fourth study by Gobbett and Sellen (2014) also examined the pre- / post-psychometric scores of TSP participants, though for an even smaller group (n = 20). These were compared to those of 20 participants who had attended a predecessor to TSP, called the 'Enhanced Thinking Skills' (ETS) programme. Fifteen psychometric scales featuring in the ETS battery were also used for TSP, providing the opportunity for comparison. The results indicated that both ETS and TSP participants showed significant changes on scales linked to impulsivity, thinking styles and criminal attitudes, with TSP participants making larger changes (though not significantly larger). Aside from these four smaller studies, other research has examined the characteristics of participants who have dropped off TSP (Shaw & Edelmann, 2019). Results suggest that those who drop off are more likely to have an antisocial personality classification, and a history of self-harm or suicide attempts.

As a body of literature, TSP research is healthy in quantitative evaluation. The only qualitative research contributions however are Barnett (2012), and Oakes (2013; Oakes et al. 2016). The most relevant qualitative study aside from these is a Home Office evaluation of ETS and another predecessor to TSP, called the 'Reasoning and Rehabilitation' (R&R)

programme (Clarke et al. 2004). In this study researchers interviewed 72 ETS and R&R graduates in prison, (10 of which had been reconvicted, and five graduates who had been released), as well as 33 programme staff, and eight non-programme staff. Findings indicated that participation in ETS and R&R brought a range of benefits, including improved social interactions, problem-solving skills, self-confidence, and a tendency toward being less impulsive and aggressive when resolving problems with people in prison. However, several implementation issues were also reported. For graduates, a key issue was motivation linked to the timing of their access onto the programmes as well as the need for post-programme support and more structured resettlement. For staff, the requirement to rigidly adhere to programme manuals was perceived to be unhelpful, and the pace was felt to be unresponsive to participants with learning disability. Some staff also noted operational challenges linked to levels of institutional support.

Whilst research has established the effects of TSP, other than Oakes (2013; Oakes et al. 2016), there has also been less focus on the context in which it is delivered. This is a gap, because the context in which a programme exists is likely to moderate its effects (Ware, 2011). In the case of prisons, the extent to which the environment is rehabilitative, and staff attitudes are supportive, is key. A recent investigation of prisoner-staff relationships at HMP Whitemoor for example, indicated that positive staff attitudes and trust created a supportive environment that fostered rehabilitation (Blagden et al., 2023). Conversely, negative staff attitudes, perceived distance, and a lack of trust have been suggested to hinder a prison's rehabilitative goals (Liebling et al., 2011). In addition, the quality of the prison environment (its “climate”) has been indicated to have a relationship on prisoners’ readiness to engage with rehabilitation (Blagden & Penford, in press; Blagden et al., 2016).

The present study was a large multisite qualitative evaluation of TSP. Data was gathered from 50 in-depth interviews with male and female adults who completed the programme. The aim was to understand their experiences, including their perception of their readiness to engage and the learning they had gained. The sample was intentionally selected to be diverse in its age, gender and ethnic profile so that attention could be paid to experiences of inclusion, and responsivity from a variety of perspectives. Another intention was to

capture the influence of the context of TSP by focusing on how the prison environment enabled or detracted from participants' ability to apply their learning in their lives.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

Interviews were conducted with 50 adult prisoners (44 Male, 6 Female), aged 22–65 (mean = 36.72, standard deviation= 9.40), who had completed TSP up to 12 months prior to interview (see Table 1). The sample aimed to be as inclusive as possible by actively recruiting ethnic minority participants. This is important as such individuals are over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice system and yet they are underrepresented in criminal justice research (Van Cleve et al., 2015; MoJ, 2022). Participants were recruited from eight prison and young offender institution (YOI) sites that were geographically spread across the HMPPS estate (see Table 1). Participants were serving prison sentences for a variety of proven offences; with violent crimes (e.g., assault), property-related crimes (e.g., theft and burglary), and drug-related crimes representing the most common primary offences (see Table 4 in Appendix 2). Further details on the sample and data collection for this study can be found in Appendix 2.

Table 1: Frequency table reporting TSP study participant demographic characteristics, including gender, age group, ethnicity, and religion

Gender

Demographic	Number in sample and percentage (%)
Male	44 (88%)
Female	6 (12%)

Age group

Demographic	Number in sample and percentage (%)
20–30 years old	16 (32%)
31–40 years old	16 (32%)
41–50 years old	15 (30%)
51–60 years old	2 (4%)
≥61 years old	1 (2%)

Ethnicity

Demographic	Number in sample and percentage (%)
White British	30 (60%)
White Irish	1 (2%)
White Gypsy or Irish Traveller	2 (4%)
Black British	9 (18%)
Asian/Asian British Pakistani or Indian	4 (8%)
Mixed: White and Black Caribbean	2 (4%)
Mixed: White and Asian	1 (2%)
Other	1 (2%)

Religion

Demographic	Number in sample and percentage (%)
Christian (Church of England or Catholic)	26 (52%)
Muslim	8 (16%)
Rastafarian	2 (4%)
None	14 (28%)

3.2 Data Analytical Procedure

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis; a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns and themes within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Thematic analysis aims to capture rich detail and represent the range and diversity of experience within the data. It has been described as a contextualist method, sitting between the two poles of constructionism and realism (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021b). This position thus acknowledges the ways individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways in which the broader social context impacts on those meanings. As such, thematic analysis reflects “reality,” even if that reality is inherently subjective (Braun et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis adhered to the phases of qualitative thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021b), consisting of familiarization and detailed readings of the data collected, progressing to initial and systematic coding of the data, and then generating initial themes from the coded data. The final phases included labelling and reviewing

themes, ensuring that they were consistent with the coding, that they were grounded in the interview data, and were truly representative of the sample, to avoid thematic drift (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Noble & Smith, 2015). It is important to note that the extracts utilised in the analysis are, as outlined by Clarke and Braun (2013) and Braun et al. (2016), illustrative of the theme rather than "proof" of the theme, due to the subjective nature of coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). In keeping with Braun and Clarke's (2021) guidance, final themes (see Table 2) represented coherent patterns across participants' interviews, were underpinned by clear, unifying central organising concepts, and were confirmed through consensus to be representative of the data (further details on the analysis for this study can be found in Appendix 2).

Table 2: Main themes and sub-themes identified through Thematic Analysis

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Groundwork to cultivate change	1.1. Timing is everything 1.2. Superficial choice to participate
2. Facilitators of change	2.1. Genuineness and reciprocity in therapeutic relationships 2.2. Enabling and engaging learning
3. Seeing life through a new lens	3.1. Shedding new light on old situations 3.2. Strategising for a better future
4. Applying learning, reflections and 'doing' change	4.1. Enacting change in-moment 4.2. Relational change and validation
5. Context hampering change	5.1. Feeling vulnerable, ambivalent and apprehensive 5.2. Limited off-programme support

3.3 Study approach limitations and interpretation of findings

This evaluation presents an in-depth analysis of qualitative interviews, with active efforts to include different ages, genders, ethnicities, and neurotypes. Although the sample size achieved (n = 50) can be considered large for a qualitative study, it should be noted that participants were identified by practitioners based at each prison site based on their willingness to participate in the research, rather than being randomly selected. Moreover,

despite active efforts to include participants in the sample who had started but not completed TSP, all participants who took part in this study had completed the programme. Amongst females, (of whom there are far fewer in HMPPS than there are males[1]), six took part in this study, none of which were from ethnic minority groups. Therefore, taking these methodological limitations into account, there is the potential for sample bias, with the perspectives of participants who were more successful with TSP (and willing to engage with research) shaping the findings. This may also be an artefact of the sampling approach taken and the impact of the self-selection process. Therefore, a degree of caution should be applied when interpreting the findings as they may not be representative of all TSP participants or the different types of participants (e.g., gender identity, younger or older individuals, ethnic groups, neurotypes).

[1] On 31st March 2024, males made up 96% of the total prison population and females 4%. Ministry of Justice (2024).

4. Theme 1: Groundwork to cultivate change

This theme describes participants' experiences and mindsets of those who participated in this study, in the lead-up to engaging with TSP. It sets out their initial motivations for participation on the programme, and how this contextualised their readiness and subsequent engagement. Specifically, this theme examined the contrast between participants' reported internal motivators for participating in TSP, and the more external reasons they had for engaging. Fundamentally, this theme highlights the complex, dynamic and multifaceted nature of motivation and readiness, and how experiences of choice and autonomy are integral considerations in accredited programmes.

4.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Timing is everything

This subtheme emphasised the importance of timing as an integral dimension of an individual's decision and readiness to engage with TSP and broader motivation to change. Participants often emphasised the importance of individuals possessing internal motivation for choosing to start TSP, which served as a prerequisite to their investment in the programme, their willingness to engage, and the potential for them to reap any benefits therein. When reflecting on the underpinnings of their motivation, participants often identified that reaching a pivotal turning point in their life was the foundation of their readiness to engage and change, and an important precursor to their positive engagement with TSP. Resonating with existing research on identity change and turning points as key dimensions of the desistance process (Maruna, 2001; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Cid & Martí, 2012), participants frequently attributed factors such as newfound family commitments, personal maturity and a desire for personal growth as examples of key drivers for personal change, with TSP serving as a viable conduit of said change.

> "I been in a jail since the age of 16, know what I mean, and I just need to like think about things before I do them, like, know what I mean, make me think like think more, really think about them and stuff like that, I'm missing out on my kids growing up and stuff like that cause I'm getting too old now I think it not coming in that jail and I'm sick of it." **[Participant 28]**

A common thread among participants was a "lightbulb" (Participant 40) realisation that prison would be a reality for the rest of their lives, unless they decided to change. Several participants expressed a sense of fatigue and exasperation with the unsustainable cycle of offending and conviction, and the emergence of new priorities in their life (e.g., becoming a good parent) that were incompatible with their present life circumstances (i.e., living in prison). These factors, paired with ageing, culminated as catalysts for their commitment to personal change; theoretically, moving participants into the "Contemplation" and "Action" phases of change (see Prochaska & DiClemente, 1992).

> "I'm getting a bit older miss, I've done a lot of prison, and it's time to change. There comes a point in your life when you just had enough anyway" **[Participant 39]**

Several participants contrasted this "right time of life" with what they regarded as ill-timed previous experiences of programmes. Multiple individuals in our sample had previously engaged with former iterations of TSP or its predecessor, the Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) programme. There were mixed views on these previous experiences, but a common theme was that the programmes had been presented to them at the wrong point in their life, resulting in limited receptiveness and content not being implemented. In making sense of this, participants often felt that they had simply been too young or too immature to appreciate the potential value of the programme and had therefore been disengaged from the outset. This stood in contrast to their more recent experiences of TSP:

> "I'm more mature as well and I feel I'm ready for TSP more than I was when I first started. I think when I first done it I think I was doing it for I dunno parole get out early but now I'm doing it for myself." **[Participant 38]**

> "Last time I didn't really care I didn't really care I didn't I don't think I wanted to change." **[Participant 3]**

Others indicated that the timing in their sentence was also critical to their readiness to engage with TSP, and some found that the programme (and others like it) had been ill-timed in relation to their sentence journey. In these cases, participants emphasised how the requisite headspace to meaningfully engage with TSP can become compromised by the need to process the reality of their conviction and sentence. Participants who had found TSP to be poorly timed in their sentence previously had found it difficult to participate fully in sessions, and did not feel ready to change more broadly, as they came to terms with their new-found circumstances:

> "I didn't take a lot from it then, I was just getting into me sentence and me head was all over the place." **[Participant 7]**

> "I think putting people through TSP when they've just been sentenced, they've got to get their head around what they've got first, it's – it's give them a year or two and then go right, I think TSP could be good for you now because you've got to get your head around it… it's no good putting somebody on a TSP course when they've only just been sentenced… you're trying to get your head round what you've got before you can even start thinking about pros and cons and icebergs and all this, you need time." **[Participant 32]**

In summary, resonating with the readiness conditions outlined in Ward et al.'s (2004) multifactor offender readiness model (MORM), this subtheme highlighted the importance of reaching alignment between internal and situational factors in the development of readiness for interventions and change, with timing perhaps representing a nexus point between those factors. However, the complex nature and interaction of these factors suggests that "ideal timing" for intervention is subjective and particular to each individual, with no one-size-fits-all all approach (Stephenson et al., 2018).

4.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Choice in participation

For some participants in this study, their engagement with TSP was based on a more performative or instrumental "box-ticking" motivation, rather than an authentic motive to change. It was common for these participants to refer to TSP completion as a practical necessity of their sentence (i.e., a means to an end). That is, participants frequently

identified the completion of their sentence plan, acquiring parole and Category D (open prison) status as being fundamental reasons for their participation in TSP. Over half of the participants (58%, 29/50 participants) said an external factor was their main motivation for initially participating in TSP, usually tied to their sentence plan or progression.

> "Main thing, it's on me sentence plan really, obviously, I want me cat D, so I've got to do everything to make it look like I'm actually trying to do something about it." **[Participant 19]**

> "The motivation back then was do TSP get to D Cat it was a tick box exercise because I knew if I didn't do it I wouldn't get my D Cat… I didn't go into it wanting to learn or I'm gonna come in here learn anything or try to stop my reoffending it was just do it get them off my back." **[Participant 9]**

This view of TSP was often accompanied by a cynicism toward the programme. This seemed to be reinforced and compounded by negative prisoner attitudes towards TSP and those who engage with it in some prison sites:

> "There's a big stigma of TSP, like, what's the point no one really gets anything out of it. But I think that's, like I say, people not wanting to do it, they're just forced into it." **[Participant 33]**

> "I was gonna expect is everything that I'd heard before from other prisoners that had been on it a couple of years back, few years back, they're all saying it's a load of sh*t this, that it's all about them trying to catch you out, ticking boxes, even if you do do it, it doesn't help towards your sentence plan or anything like that so it was all negative I was hearing." **[Participant 24]**

The majority of participants suggested that the "choice" or "decision" to "do TSP" was, in their experience, an illusion. Although, individuals voluntarily elect to engage in TSP, participants described the various ways in which the programme appeared mandatory and that they felt they did not possess an actual choice. For example, some participants highlighted a sense of implicit pressure to complete, and in this way, many felt that TSP was an enforced component of their sentence. Consequently, some participants felt an

ambivalence, at least initially, which undermined the legitimacy of their "choice" and autonomy.

> "Basically, they want you to do some sort of offending behaviour course they put it on your sentence plan saying now you do it or you're not getting on Cat D, you're not getting your parole – that don't make sense to me cause it's like you're asking people to do something that they don't really wanna do it, in all honesty, they're probably gonna still do it, pretend, and... say yeah, it's worked." **[Participant 31]**

Relatedly, other participants shared experiences where they had possessed genuine desires to engage with TSP, but they felt their "choice" to join the programme had been taken away by systemic barriers to participation (e.g., long waiting lists, and others being prioritised). These issues echo the experiences of Offender Supervisors and Offender Managers reported by Stephenson et al. (2018), which emphasised the resource constraints faced by prisons and the implications this can have for the sequencing of interventions. While these may be operationally understandable (e.g. prioritising those close to the end of their sentence or coming up for parole), they nevertheless added to a sense of disempowerment amongst some participants in this study and can reflect a common experience of individuals in custodial settings (Reis et al., 2019). For some, this set a somewhat problematic undertone for any subsequent engagement with TSP and a tough bedrock for facilitators to work with in the first instance. Indeed, Holdsworth et al. (2018) found that facilitators reported that unmotivated group members could be problematic and disruptive to group motivation in programmes. Participants in this study reported how this could contribute towards individuals' disengagement, exclusion, and disruptive behaviours during TSP sessions, as those uninterested and unmotivated individuals were often not fully invest in their TSP experience.

However, it is important to note that motivation is dynamic and although many participants started out externally motivated, this did not stay static, and motivation changed. Of those participants who were initially externally motivated, around 55% (16 out of 29 participants) had shifted to more internally motivated states, often through engaging with the programme and seeing the benefits of the skills being taught. Despite some initial doubts,

scepticism, and resistance to take part, many participants identified the benefits of their participation in TSP.

> "People want to get on it for that even though they want to get on it for that reason. Once they do get on it. You can't help... take on board some of the stuff you've learned in TSP, you can't help it… It seeps in!" **[Participant 41]**

> "At first I just thought it's no good this and then when I got there and started to do it, I started enjoying it." **[Participant 2]**

Of those who were initially resistant or externally motivated, many participants described how their experience during the programme managed to (re)ignite their motivation to engage and readiness to change. These participants reported a shift from doing TSP as a means to an end, to legitimately engaging for personal benefit. For some, this process was like osmosis, in that being exposed to TSP meant that they subsumed some of the learning. It may also have been the case that "the very entry into a therapeutic relationship… permits the client to entertain and 'try out' possibilities of being that provide a temporary means by which the worldview is reconfigured" (Spinelli, 2007, pg. 87). As noted, this shift sometimes stemmed from inadvertently identifying personal relevance and utility in the content, which demonstrates the importance of facilitators persevering to provide programme participants with engaging opportunities to acquire (or develop) skills for change and learn about the associated potential benefits therein; even when participants may not seem motivated to change per se.

Other times participants attributed their motivation shift to interactions with peers in the TSP group. This latter dimension was particularly important in the development and/or maintenance of an individual's preparedness to engage. That is to say that allocation to a group where the majority are ready and motivated to change could have a normative social influence on a more reticent programme participant, prompting them to open up and become more involved in, and receptive to, TSP.

> "Seeing everybody giving it that honest and sincere go and no one holding back no one like if if you was in the group and there was a sub group that was just talking among themselves not interested not willing to share you would feel apprehensive about being open about your experiences if you don't know how it would be viewed or treated but when everybody's on the same page it's so much easier." **[Participant 10]**

> "I always was nervous about getting up and talking about certain things and all that but when you sit there and realise that everybody else is talking about their issues and to see it actually get resolved and being able it actually benefitting if you get to benefit from it it then made me decide to be honest and open." **[Participant 13]**

However, by the same mechanism, initially motivated participants described experiences where the negative attitudes and superficial motives to participation were more visible amongst their peers on the programme. This influenced them to close-up, and disengage and otherwise, it generally disrupted their learning.

> "Sometimes in the group you get disruptive people, I feel like sometimes they knock you off your own game… there was a lot of people that just wanted to mess about when someone else disrupts the place you get knocked off your own game at the same time." **[Participant 21]**

This highlights the importance of recognising the potential contagious quality of motivation and readiness in group-based programmes, which has been reported by programme facilitators in previous research (Holdsworth et al., 2018), and how this may need to be factored into decisions around group allocation. This issue, amongst others discussed in this subtheme, highlights the dynamic and precarious nature of motivation and readiness in the context of accredited programmes, which programme staff must remain aware of.

5. Theme 2: Facilitators of change

This theme highlighted how the role of the TSP facilitators was fundamental in assisting participants in their learning and development of skills. Specifically, participants outlined the importance of having genuine, reciprocal relationships with their facilitators in order to be open and honest and fully participate within the group. This main theme and related subthemes were important analytical anchor points in this analysis. Relationships with the facilitators appeared to have a profound impact on the learning and engagement of the participants. In this sample around 90% (45 out of 50) of participants gave positive examples of how facilitators supported change, how they helped engagement, tailored learning, and created meaningful exchanges/relationships.

5.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Genuineness and Reciprocity in Therapeutic Relationships

All participants discussed how much of an impact their relationship with the facilitators had on their overall TSP experience, specifically when the relationship was perceived as genuine and reciprocal. Forging strong, meaningful therapeutic relationships has been shown to play an important role in the process of change and is a critical predictor of intervention readiness (Blasko et al., 2018; Blatt et al., 2010; Dahle, 1997). Most participants highlighted the importance of having genuine, reciprocal relationships with their facilitators, noting that they would not have been able to engage with the programme if they had perceived them as insincere.

> “If you have facilitators and you come down and you just don’t, nothing about them and you can’t work with someone like that. I couldn’t anyway personally if they just going oh yeah just wanted to go home for a wage, you can tell if someone just wants to do the wage or help people and these guys here round of applause from me cause they wanna help people, they’re not here just for the money.”
> **[Participant 25]**

Facilitators were viewed by participants as being genuine and authentic as opposed to showing interest as a matter of formality or because it was just part of the "job" or to get a "wage". Several participants indicated how their facilitators consistently showed interest by actively listening to them.

> "You could tell this person was listening to me and then like when we had another one-to-one she would always know what I'd said in the last one I wouldn't have to remind her or anything like that (…) makes that difference doesn't it like you've listened she's not reading off a paper she knows." **[Participant 33]**

Participants felt that their facilitators' ability to recall information they had previously disclosed to them indicated a genuine interest in what they had to say. Listening and recalling information is a crucial component of therapeutic relationships when working with individuals in prison, as many of the interactions they experience with wider prison staff may not go beyond what is required to meet their basic needs (Arnold, 2008). This was particularly prevalent as several participants detailed that they were accustomed to being dismissed by wider prison staff and did not have support systems beyond the prison that they could talk to, which has previously been related to negative outcomes (see De Claire & Dixon, 2015; Visher et al., 2013). Clients who perceive a close bond and alliance with their therapist tend to be more willing to disclose personal information (Bachelor, 2013; Cruwys et al., 2023). Alliance-building is a central feature of effective psychotherapy (Flückiger et al., 2018) and may be of particular relevance for stigmatised groups, people with trauma histories and those within the criminal justice system (Jahnke et al., 2023).

Likewise, in this study, facilitators were often reported as willing to share aspects of themselves, their experiences or relevant personal information with the participants. This self-disclosure had several positive effects on the quality of their relationship with participants including encouraging participant openness, building trust, and modelling positive behaviour. Below, a participant highlights how the openness from facilitators engendered a climate of trust, which helped them engage with the programme.

> "Started to get a bit more trusting of the facilitators so it's like now I feel like I can I can give a bit more and what they did as well I would say they gave a lot of their personal experiences to us so they make you feel like well you know what they was on the course with us it felt like they was doing it with us (…) so everyone can go you know what I can do this they've given their examples." **[Participant 9]**

It has been found that self-disclosure from facilitators can promote several positive outcomes including having positive effects on the quality of the therapeutic relationship, facilitating behavioural changes and mental patterns, and increasing the perception of the facilitator's authenticity (Schnellbacher & Leijssen, 2009). Travaglini et al. (2012) found that opening up and sharing information may be challenging for participants within a group setting for fear of judgement and the possibility of exploitation from other participants, but by observing facilitators opening up about and accepting their own vulnerabilities, participants felt confident enough to do so in turn. Several participants noted that this self-disclosure from the facilitators also created a sense of togetherness within the group.

> "It was nice to see the facilitators because really on courses I wouldn't think that the facilitator would talk about their life do you get what I mean but they actually did do you know what I mean so that was that's what made me think do you know what fair play do you know what I mean like we're going through this together." **[Participant 23]**

Participants felt that strategies such as actively listening and facilitator genuineness allowed them to form trusting relationships with their facilitators, with trust playing a crucial role in the process of change (Beaton & Thielking, 2020). Despite almost all participants feeling as though they could fully trust their facilitators, one female participant highlighted the ruptures in trust she had experienced.

> "It did affect it a little bit, and then she saw how upset I was about it and she went look I'm sorry, but that had gone, then that where I used to trust her as such, I didn't really trust her as much, and I kind of I carried on with the course but I held back, even though I completed it, after we done roleplaying it, I kind of guarded what I was saying to her." **[Participant 32]**

This participant found that this negative experience she had with her facilitator broke their trusting relationship. Despite the facilitator apologising, they were not able to regain her trust, which ultimately impacted her motivation, engagement, and interest in the programme. It has been argued that if left unresolved ruptures in trust can contribute to poor behavioural outcomes (Eubanks et al., 2018). Although this lack of trust between participant and facilitator was an isolated account within the sample, it nevertheless highlighted the integral role of having a trusting facilitator-participant relationship in cementing change.

5.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Enabling and engaging learning

This sub-theme centred around participants' descriptions of inclusive specific responsivity practices exhibited by TSP facilitators (Andrews et al., 2011; Jung & Dowker, 2016), and why they were important to participants. Participants provided examples of facilitators' approaches to programme delivery that tailored well to individuals' characteristics, supported their engagement and understanding of concepts in TSP, and helped to embed their learning.

As TSP explores interactions between an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviours, there is potential for some participants to encounter difficulties comprehending and meaningfully engaging with content. Despite this, participants frequently referred to the ways in which facilitators made more abstract content feel concrete and accessible (i.e., "brain-friendly" approaches, Williams & Carter, 2018). Most frequently, participants described how facilitators visually mapping out key concepts in diagrammatic forms (e.g., red flags and green flags on flipcharts) fundamentally enhanced their learning experience on the programme.

> "Seeing it all there rather than it just being said to me kind of helped me to learn it… They were the circles there and having circles and then putting your red flags on the outside as well as the inside and yeah that kind of helped more than it possibly would've done if she just said well oh this is your circle and your red flags have got to be close to this one you'd be like what the hell are you talking about I can't see no circle yeah I think if you if they actually put it down onto paper so you can actually understand visualisation of it I think that helps." **[Participant 32]**

Linked to embedding learning, many participants also found it useful to recap learning points covered, either by explicitly revisiting ideas and rehearsing skills through activities and discussions, or implicitly through the use of visual prompts and reminders during the programme (e.g., posters on the walls, printed materials provided by facilitators etc.) Although a minority of participants felt that this could be somewhat repetitive, and contribute toward boredom, irritation, and disengagement; done correctly, participants found benefit in solidifying their knowledge and skills through this repetition.

> "It was always pinned up on the wall so the next time we went in the group so that was good as well because we always had the reminder of that and if we were asked a question and we struggled we could always look round the whole room and there was always something there that we could always help us if we were struggling." **[Participant 24]**

> "I did find that with TSP it's repetitive but that sort of logged everything in my head then." **[Participant 12]**

This general positive regard for repetition reflects existing literature on core correctional practice; that is, if new skills are to be maintained and serve as alternatives to previous offending behaviours then they must be repeated, rehearsed, and reinforced, supporting neural changes in the brain that underpin new learning (Walton et al., 2017).

Relatedly, participants also reflected positively on the opportunity to engage in conversations with facilitators outside of the sessions and follow-up drop-in sessions after their completion of the programme. This helped participants to continue to refresh and apply their learning post-TSP, as well as providing space for individuals to reflect on novel situations they had encountered and challenges they had experienced in transferring skills from TSP to those situations. That said, the availability of such follow-up opportunities was not standard across all prisons, and where it was absent, some participants expressed a desire for such a provision.

Beyond enhancing retention of taught content, participants found that more interactive, multimodal learning approaches utilised in TSP were also of great benefit to maintaining their general interest, motivation, and engagement in programme content. Participants

praised approaches such as in-session games and more kinaesthetic[2] skills practices as ways of stimulating engagement and maintaining interest. Activities like these also contributed toward a positive, light-hearted social milieu in the programme and seemed to enhance group cohesion, which has been associated with positive programme outcomes in existing research (see Roldán-Pardo et al., 2024).

> "It was good… they had visuals they had audios they had good participation we had hands on activities so it was I feel like they had all the elements in it for everyone. Some people might need to read it twice, some people might need someone to read it to them and explain, some people might want to see it actually being acted out, so they know how to do it… some people learn better with pictures so we had picture books… we had games just to make it fun learning experience, easy environment, so it wasn't like oh well we're doing TSP today get your books out lots of writing lots of talking about personal stuff, they made it fun activities, so yeah split the groups together let's see who can win the challenge, forfeit you've got to say what you've remembered from the course that they will have learnt got to give key points so even though it was fun they was still learning." **[Participant 8]**

Whilst these various approaches were important to most participants' learning and engagement, they were especially important to the experiences of neurodivergent participants and participants with other accessibility issues (e.g., eyesight impairments). These individuals expressed a sense of gratitude for the seemingly small, but nonetheless meaningful adjustments that facilitators made to their delivery in TSP sessions, which helped them to feel engaged and able to learn more effectively.

> "There was a guy in our session who, I think he has something about the clock, like he could hear it ticking, he could see it, he didn't like, and I think he mentioned it one day he said, can you take that clock down from the wall, it's doing my head in, and they took it down, they took it away." **[Participant 45]**

[2] This typically refers to learning experiences and activities that involve physical movement and/or hands-on learning by "doing".

> “I’m dyslexic me so sometimes when I read stuff it jumps all over the page but I even got support from the facilitators for that… I got support by [facilitator] if I needed it to come and help me do the writing or the spelling.” **[Participant 5]**

> “One of the staff members she could see every time I went off track of time, and started staring out the window. She'd ask me a question. Like a random question, it wouldn’t even be related to the… umm, she’d be like, 'oh what flavours are in Neapolitan ice cream?' 'Strawberry, vanilla, chocolate' – back in the room! She's hit me with em… Because I'm quick with… pretty sharp anyway. As she sees me goes off, she'll get me back, concentrating, then.” **[Participant 46]**

> “There was like certain things it was like I didn’t have me glasses then so she used to do like make it bigger, so I could see it and understand it better… Even on the board when she drew on the board she would do it bigger.” **[Participant 7]**

Echoing existing literature pertaining to neuroinclusive adaptations in behaviour interventions (Vinter et al., 2023; Woodhouse et al., 2024), common examples of adjustments cited by participants in this study included, the provision of supplementary written notes that summarised session content, simplification of language, moves away from reading as a primary means of delivering content, taking extra time to reframe language or provide more elaborate explanations of content (e.g., alternative metaphors and illustrations), and utilising different coloured pens and paper according to individual need. As an extension of this, beyond how the material was taught, neurodivergent participants also provided examples of facilitators accommodating individual differences during TSP more generally, which became conducive to their engagement and sense of confidence, acceptance and belonging on the programme. For instance, some participants with ADHD described ways in which facilitators permitted them to ‘unmask’ in sessions (e.g., providing space to have “brain breaks” and removing the expectation that they must remain seated), which helped to provide them with sufficient headspace to focus on programme content. Feeling free to unmask like this can be critical, as masking can otherwise impose a considerable burden on neurodivergent individuals; including harmful mental health effects such as burnout, chronic stress, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Syharat et al., 2023).

> "I have ADHD, quite bad ADHD, so being in a room for long periods of time is quite hard for me, so I spoke to them the ladies that was the facilitators that was doing the TSP and they like put things in place to help me with my ADHD as well… I could get up and walk go to like the window, and before they would move onto say like the next thing they used to type out on a piece of paper what we was doing next, so that they would give it to me before we would do it, so I knew what we was doing and they gave me fidget spinners and stuff to play with."
> **[Participant 29]**

This subtheme highlights that the neurodivergent participants who were included in this study found the delivery of TSP and facilitator responses to be accessible and accommodating to a wide range of individual learning needs and preferences. However, neurodiversity includes a broad range of neurotypes, with a variety of non-neurotypical individual differences. Within this, for those more likely to present with characteristics associated with learning disability and challenges (LDC), recent large-scale impact evaluations of TSP (Brinn et al. 2023; Elliott et al. 2023) revealed a less consistent pattern of statistically significant effects on reoffending and prison behaviour than was apparent for those who presented without. Therefore, whilst the findings here suggest those with certain neurodivergences such as dyslexia and ADHD found the delivery style of TSP accommodating and adaptable, research continues to emphasise the importance of correctly placing individuals with daily adaptive functioning problems and low intellectual functioning onto appropriately adapted programmes.

In addition, despite many reflecting positively on TSP's neuroinclusive environment, a smaller subset of participants nevertheless reported a sense of alienation and discomfort if they were singled out in the group for having different support needs, concerned that others may see them as disrupting the group. This emphasises the importance of facilitators handling the implementation of specific responsivity adaptations and accommodations sensitively, to strike a balance between facilitating learning support and maintaining social inclusion.

> "Sometimes, when you leave the room, like, they just tend to like wait for them to come back in d'you know what I mean starting it feels like it's gonna hold everyone back and then I feel like that will cause an issue cos then people look at that person oh fucking hell." **[Participant 27]**

Ultimately, this subtheme illustrated facilitators' conscious efforts to create an enabling neuroinclusive learning environment for all individuals and to tailor the programme experience to everyone in the room, irrespective of neurotype. This suggests that current practices on TSP are fitting with the MoJ (2022) neurodiversity action plan, which has emphasised the need to ensure adjustments are made to support neurodivergent individuals in the criminal justice system, including within rehabilitation.

6. Theme 3: Seeing life through a new lens

This theme centred around the ways TSP prompted changes in participants' thinking about the world and their place in it. Here, participants outlined how TSP equipped them with a new lens, through which they could re-interpret and evaluate their past, present and future. In particular, participants cited specific exercises on TSP that provided them with a means of constructively breaking down situations, relationships, and goal setting. Indeed, this was an important theme which was endorsed by 68% (34 out of 50) of participants.

6.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Shedding new light on old situations

All participants identified how being guided to constructively reflect on their past through structured exercises was an impactful and personally meaningful feature of their TSP experience. Participants provided examples of specific exercises that prompted them to re-interpret past situations and relationships in a new light (e.g., social circles, red and green flags, the iceberg, and skills-practice exercises). These newfound means of interpreting past experiences and relationships prompted participants to recognise previously overlooked consequences of past behaviours and helped them to identify positive alternative solutions they could utilise when problem-solving in the future.

Several participants identified how TSP helped them to realise that some relationships that they had previously considered beneficial to their lives (e.g., friends, intimate partners) were not positive, and perhaps even damaging. For example, one participant described how TSP helped him to critically analyse past relationships with others, and recognise problematic individuals in his social circle.

> "It definitely has helped like just being able to identify certain aspects and certain things that you never really knew was there, for example, your social circle, you think your friends are your friends like, but really, you've got them red flag friends who you know they can be your friend but they're not, like they might not be helpful to your everyday life." **[Participant 15]**

Beyond simply re-thinking the nature and quality of these relationships, a number of participants described how their re-evaluations had led to positive actions and life changes (e.g., disconnecting from unhealthy relationships and associates, rekindling or repairing positive social connections). This resonates with existing literature, which has indicated the importance of severing connections to problematic relationships and environments as being fundamental to the desistance process and reconstructing a non-criminal future (Maruna & Roy, 2007; Williams & Schaefer, 2021).

In addition to re-evaluating relationships, participants also referred to developing alternative interpretations of specific past experiences. Through TSP exercises such as skills-practices, the participants were encouraged to dissect specific challenging experiences from the past (e.g., antecedent events leading up to their offences). Through these, participants were prompted to explore how they behaved in those situations; recognise consequences of their actions; identify what (if any) problem solving they engaged with; and collaboratively explore alternative solutions to those problems with their group. Resonating with the core TSP targets (Harris & Riddy, 2008), powerful facets of these exercises were the deeper consideration of how their actions carried wider, longer-term consequences for themselves and others, increased recognition of others' perspectives, and the value of weighing up pros and cons before acting.

> "To be honest with you it's not all about like crime and stuff like that, it's about your own circumstances, it's about your family, like, the people that you affect at home as well isn't it? Like me partner, the kids, me mum and dad, and me brothers and sisters, me family and friends, it's not just like – it's like a big ripple, a ripple effect in your circles, it just affects everybody, really." **[Participant 39]**

> "Now, obviously, I can see what's more important like if I got into an argument or a conflict with someone I'd just leave it, because I've got to think this is gonna send me back in jail and it's not worth it, like, I've – I've got my mum and dad to think about and stuff, you know, I've got family that cares about me and I've been in here a long time so it's not really worth it." **[Participant 8]**

Although skills-practice exercises were often experienced as quite daunting, intense, and emotive, it was arguably these facets that gave participants the power to elicit changes in

thinking. Ultimately, participants found that these retrospective reflections on past situations, and related feedback and reinforcement from others in TSP, equipped them with a more evaluative, less reactive interpretation of (and response to), challenging situations and interactions moving forward, with an ongoing awareness of potential consequences. This contextualises previous quantitative research, which has indicated the quantifiable benefits of embedding role-play skills practice exercises in cognitive-behavioural programmes (Sperber & Lowenkamp, 2017).

> "Weighing it all up first, whereas usually I make blink decisions and just think kind of quick, it's been like three four years now, I've stopped making rash decisions, you know, acting on my emotion at the time." **[Participant 11]**

> "Straight away it's like your mind reverses back to TSP and says remember what you've learnt, you know, you can sort this situation out, you know, you can stop it becoming heated and I think that's massive." **[Participant 13]**

Beyond the practical benefits of engaging in this more critical, less reactive approach to interpreting the world around them, participants also expressed a corresponding inner sense of confidence, self-efficacy, and mastery. This could be interpreted as what some have referred to as the "language of agency", which has been positively associated with desistance from crime (Johnston et al., 2019, p.60). That is, an individual's sense of agency in their life and confidence in their ability to desist from crime (or "desistance self-efficacy", p.62) can be conducive to reducing recidivism (Johnston et al., 2019). Echoing this, many of the participants in the present study felt that they had the necessary tools, skills, and capability to face and adapt to life's challenges in a more constructive way moving forward, permitting them to move on from the criminal justice system and focus on personal growth.

6.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Strategising for a better future

Most participants highlighted that future-focused goal-setting exercises were a very beneficial and impactful feature of TSP. For some, the value of identifying and setting goals had not been evident to them prior to TSP. By contrast, other participants described how

goal-setting more generally was not new to them, but it was the specific TSP methods of goal setting and planning to attain those goals that they found particularly transformative.

Some participants recalled how, prior to TSP, they had previously set big goals without a realistic strategy for how to attain them. This looser approach to goal setting and attainment had previously led to a poorer sense of progress in relation to those goals and an ultimate lack of goal attainment. Conversely, TSP had helped participants to successfully identify feasible broad goals and corresponding incremental "mini goals".

> "I've always had goals anyway, even though I've always fallen short of them maybe at times, but I think it it's good to break it down, which I've learnt on this course, where you get your goal and you break it down in so many sections and you just try do your mini goals as you go along, so then if you do fall at a goal you can always move round it and keep going forward." **[Participant 1]**

> "I've got setting the mini goals, cause when you, when you want to do something, or when I want to do something, it seems like it's a mile away. But with mini goals, it's, it breaks it down, and when you achieve that one, you look forward to the next one, and before you know it, you get to where you want to be." **[Participant 42]**

Resonating with the Good Lives Model idea of strengthening instrumental secondary goods (concrete means) to secure primary goods (Purvis et al., 2013; Ward et al., 2007), these mini goals helped participants to plot a course between their present circumstances and their future ambitions. The nature, types and specificity of goals varied across participants. Some goals were shorter term, and often related to their sentence (e.g., acquiring Category D status, parole, progressing on sentence plan). Other goals were longer term, and were associated with key dimensions of leading a more fulfilling, offence-free life (e.g., getting a job, attaining qualifications, acquiring stable housing, improving relationships, reconnecting with family, abstaining from substance misuse).

> "My first specific goal is erm on my next parole board getting a positive erm getting a positive outcome from my next parole board which will be imminent erm getting in the community setting them mini goals for myself." **[Participant 10]**

> "Now I've got goals, what I wanna do, what I wanna achieve, it's helped me in the sense like like I'm hoping to be, like by mid next year I wanna be on no conditions, towards the end of next year I want to hopefully pass my HGV license because that's my end goal now, and then by the time I get released I wanna be in some sort of employment so that's like it's give me goals." **[Participant 8]**

Linked to this, there was an interesting interaction between goal-setting and consequential thinking, whereby the formation of new goals and associated plans created a new set of potential consequences and a context of more being at stake. As such, participants possessed new motivations for changing their behaviours, to avoid compromising goals moving forward.

> "An incident arised on the servery, and before I started TSP the incident would've been a lot bigger than it was because I would've hit him… my goal is to get my D Cat, now I know if I was to have a fight I wouldn't achieve my goal because you can't have a fight and then go to D Cat, so I stepped meself back thought about my goals and dealt with it in a different way." **[Participant 29]**

The pattern of participants finding value in mapping out the routes to achieving goals emerged through most interviews. Fundamentally, this often provided participants with a more feasible strategy for achieving future goals and living a more fulfilling, offence-free life in the future, and some participants expressed a sense of reward and meaningful accomplishment from meeting their mini goals. Equipped with their step-by-step strategy for goal attainment, participants frequently conveyed a sense of hope, confidence, optimism, and resilience for their future.

> "I wasn't in a good place before mate, to tell the truth, but now I feel in a good place I'm ready to go. It wasn't four month ago I was scared to go out them gates because I been for in that long. But I'm really really starting to look forwards to it now." **[Participant 30]**

However, it was evident in interviews that for some participants, there appeared to be an overreliance on the dependability of the mini goal approach as a means of living an offence-free life. That is, some participants' optimism perhaps strayed into an

overconfidence, to the point where they overlooked or disregarded the complex array of challenges that they may face upon release from prison. These participants felt that as long as they had a clear plan of mini goals, nothing could threaten or compromise their potential to live an offence-free life.

> "If you have mini goals and you strategize it yeah you're planning so anything that's gonna stop you isn't really gonna stop you because you've preplanned for it properly almost bullet proof." **[Participant 18]**

This could be particularly problematic when facing the harsh realities of the "pains of desistance" that many individuals can encounter upon release (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016, p.568). For example, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) suggest that a failure to meet goals set can seriously compromise an individual's sense of hope and give rise to a sense of indignant anger and disappointment, potentially threatening the development of a pro-social identity. That said, the overreliance on mini goals was not shared across the sample in the present study. Several other participants, particularly those who had experienced release and recall previously, recognised that the mini goals were merely one piece of the broader puzzle of their desistance from crime, and recognised that they may fall short of goals or additional complicating circumstances may intervene with their goal attainment. These individuals more critically identified additional layers and/or caveats to their expectations and plans for the future, arguably conveying a more realistic view of what the realities of life will be like after prison.

7. Theme 4: Applying learning, reflections and 'doing' change

The daily sounds and sights of imprisonment, including such features as metal gates, bustling concourses, busy prison wings, structured daily movements, servery queues and various austere visual stimuli mean that imprisonment is a sensory and embodied experience (Herrity, Schmidt & Warr, 2021). There may also be the experience of high rates of custodial violence. For example, in the 12 months to March 2024, there were 28,292 assault incidents in prisons, reflecting a 27% increase from the previous 12 months, and incidents in female prisons (544 incidents per 1,000 prisoners) were higher than in male prisons (317 incidents per 1,000 prisoners) (MoJ 2024). Amidst this general backdrop, this theme captured how prison, while perhaps not always the most reinforcing environment for psychological interventions, does provide multiple, live opportunities to apply learning and reflections in the moment. Thus, there is the opportunity to "do" change in the environment (Blagden & Perrin, 2016).

7.1 Sub-theme 4.1: Enacting Change In-Moment

Previous themes in this report have exemplified how learning different skills enabled participants to think through the changes they want to make (e.g., using mini goals to break down a larger goal or task). These are part of a toolkit that enables reflection and planning for the individual (Farrington et al., 2022). This subtheme focuses on how the participants utilised their newly acquired learning and skills on TSP within high arousal "in moment" situations. These were typically scenarios of interpersonal conflict or tension within the prison involving "hot cognition", which could give rise to aggression, confrontation, or violence. The ability to be able to use skills in such situations is a useful measure of therapeutic success (Sequeira et al, 2024).

> "I've learnt how to walk away from a lot of situations…so he threw my cue but the tip come off not gonna lie I just paid a hundred and seventy pound I wanted to rip his head off you know what I mean but I said you know what it's only a cue sweet I'll fix it and the old me would've probably battered him with the cue do you know what I mean." **[Participant 5]**

> "I got told that someone had been in me cell because something had gone missing and instead of just running straight and kicking off about it I've gone and asked a few people and then I've asked the person who I were told who he did it, and it turns out he didn't do it and the fact I – I – I've moved the thing in my pad and then I've realised it were there…. [I would have] just acted on that word I probably would've gone and beat him up and then I'd have been in a right mess." **[Participant 1]**

Participant 5's extract is a clear example of how he was able to regulate threat and consider the consequences in the moment and choose a more pro-social course of action. The participant explains how his response pre-TSP would have been to "batter" the other person with the pool cue. Similarly, participant 1 highlights how his approach to an incident of alleged stolen property (coffee in this example) would have been enough for him to "kick off" and act violently, but through taking a step back and using skills from TSP he navigated the situation differently. Particularly salient in this example is that the participant had misplaced the item himself. This situation had the potential to end in a violent incident and contribute to wider disturbance within the prison. Such examples were prevalent within the data.

> "Because you've been so used to yourself in the past – violence, impulse. When that adrenaline hits, and you're actually feeling your emotions to where you're speaking about emotions as you would do in a TSP class, it's all 'miss, I'm doing this, I'm doing this', but when you actually feel that, it's it's hard to think logically sometimes, because you get that red mist. But knowing that, and thinking back, even when you're in that, I think back, even if it's like a little snippet, like... often one of the people I did the course with, like one of them, or when I've come in, on these sessions, on the session is quite angry. All due to outside things. People I've had like, the staff talk me through the steps of TSP while I'm angry and it works. And it has calmed me." **[Participant 46]**

As discussed by many participants, but highlighted by participant 46, many prisoners have violent and traumatic histories and this can facilitate a learned propensity or readiness to react with harmful behaviour and, in many cases, this serves as a survival strategy. Indeed, "hurt people hurting people", and this is both a biological and learned adaption that facilitates self-defence. It allows an individual to address a perceived threat by attacking and removing it (Taylor & Hocken, 2021). In the above extract the participant articulates the struggle of self-regulating in times of "in-moment" threat and that it is "hard to think logically" in such situations. Typically, during times of high arousal (threat especially), the brain's emotions centre (called the "limbic system") can impose a disinhibiting effect on prefrontal areas responsible for human executive functions like planning, impulse control, perspective taking, and consequential thinking (Hocken, Taylor & Walton, 2022). In experiential terms this can often facilitate a sense of "loss of self-control" and may be described as a "red mist" experience. However, in this example, having practiced thinking skills on TSP, participant 44 was able to compose himself, think through the consequences of acting violently, and find an alternative means of defusing his anger.

> "Pad mate, yeah, we had a bit of a falling out, like, innit. And before things got too heated and that, d'you know, I just... I just... basically, err, took a step back and thought, like I'd lose my enhanced, this, that, the other, d'you know? The consequences of all that and and... basically just bit my lip, you know? And just went for a walk, like, and then came back, and then, talked it over rationally." **[Participant 44]**

> "It had just been me dad's birthday my dad died last year I was in a bad mood anyway I said go away I can't be bothered and then he carried on and I just snapped I ran towards him went to hit him and then I stopped you know what I mean like and I thought well what am I doing. Like I've got eleven month left I need to stop." **[Participant 14]**

Similarly, participant 14 articulates how he lost control and "snapped" but was able to pull back before a violent outburst. Participant 44 was able to reflect during the incident and was able to take a step back and consider the consequences of engaging in a "heated" argument. Not only did participant 44 use techniques from TSP (e.g. consequential thinking, and distraction), but he also ensured that he had a rational conversation when his feelings had de-escalated. These are important examples of how participants were able to apply skills in the moment, highlighting how they were "doing" change and not just talking about it.

Research emphasises the importance of prisoners "doing" change and demonstrating the prosocial behaviours they learn about within interventions and programmes (Langton & Worling, 2015; Fox, 2016). It is also a way of demonstrating change in identity, by presenting more desirable selves and acting in line with one's values (McAdams, 1985). This theme also points to the potential impact of TSP on wider prison disturbance and violence. As highlighted, many participants had similar experiences and each example could have given rise to a violent incident, that could have escalated on the wing. Perhaps most importantly, for that reason, this theme provides valuable qualitative insights into the recently demonstrated effects of TSP on reducing the rate and frequency of general and violent adjudications in the male prison estate (Elliott et al. 2023). Whilst those effects of TSP were quantitatively small in terms of magnitude, our findings reveal that the behavioural changes for prisoners and the learning that underpins their ability to shift from highly reinforced violent reactions to controlled, more skilful non-harmful responses are anything but small in the context of self-development and their lives.

7.2 Sub-theme 4.2: Relational Change and Validation

One of the themes related to "enacting change" was how participants interacted with others differently and how such relational changes were being perceived and validated. The importance of this theme was stressed by 33% (16 out of 50) of the sample.

> "[The officers] even said to me I seen a change in you on the wing. Yeah they seen it straightaway I only been in this jail four months and I had what five nickings. Since me doing this I haven't had a nicking." **[Participant 25]**

> "I approach them totally differently now…I used to be shouting and screaming at them, wanting to kick their head in if I didn't get what I wanted or err if they'd been d**ks…now I don't do that, I try and have that rational conversation, put my point across and listen." **[Participant 49]**

The above extracts highlight how participants interacted and approached prison staff differently after TSP and how such changes were being recognised and validated. Participant 25 discusses how he was routinely receiving adjudications in prison and clashing with prison officers, but since doing TSP he had changed his behaviour and how he related with them. This is supported by participant 49, a female participant, who changed her entire way of relating with staff post-TSP. In her interview, participant 49 discussed how she thought staff were authoritarian and how she perceived them as the "enemy". Her approach to staff now was "totally different". It was more respectful and reciprocal. This mirrors the earlier theme of the therapeutic relationships in the group being characterised as reciprocal and genuine. Prisoner-staff relationships have been found to be vital in sustaining therapeutic gains (Blagden et al., 2017). In fact, Blagden et al. (2016; 2017) have found that meaningful relationships and interactions with staff helped to facilitate change.

A further aspect of relational change, apparent in interviews, related to negotiating boundaries with others and participants improving how they communicated and interacted with other prisoners.

> "When I first started that job, the other lads that worked on there never really cleaned it or when they did clean it, it was to a poor standard and I'm not like that, I need everything to be clean, especially when you're serving people food off it. So for the first couple of days I found I was doing the bulk of the work so instead of keep on doing it, and letting that annoyance build into anger and maybe aggression, I just got them both and I said look, I'm not a fucking idiot [laughs] you need to help me clean the servery. We need to share the responsibility, because it's dirty, and it's not right that we're feeding the prisoners off our wing from a dirty place, so instead of it turning like I said into a big thing, it was just like, you know what, sorry bro, I'll do this, you do that, you do that, we divide the work, it's not an issue yeah." **[Participant 40]**

Participant 40 discusses a work problem that could have built into anger or aggression and instead he was able to articulate his issue, discuss shared responsibility and ultimately resolve his grievance without any disturbance. This is a complex interpersonal skill, but "doing" change in this way and then seeing the desired result reinforces and validates the behaviour (see for example Blagden & Perrin, 2016). Constructive relationships within prison are important in the desistance process where establishing social relationships is seen as vital to triggering, enabling, and sustaining change (Weaver, 2015).

The final aspect of this theme was how family perceived relational change in the participants. In the following extracts, participants discuss how the changes they had made during TSP had been recognised and reinforced by family and their wider network.

> "My family can see how positive I am like how how much this course has encouraged me to actually make sure I do the the best make the best of a situation." **[Participant 13**]

> "My partner says like I'm a lot calmer… you're thinking about things more, more thinking about stuff so you've actually kind of changed." **[Participant 8]**

> "I spoke to me missus and like she said that's not like you to do that you'd have flipped out with that, and even my missus has seen changes in me you know." **[Participant 39]**

This links to previous themes where participants discussed how TSP helped them reflect more, approach situations and people differently in the future and to think through the consequences of their behaviour. Having these changes recognised by others helps with reinforcing the behaviour. There is consistent research on such reinforcement, for example, “Pygmalion effects” and “interpersonal expectancy effects” on prisoner outcomes (LeBel et al., 2008). Maruna et al. (2009) in particular has argued that the Pygmalion effect (high expectation produces higher outcome) is important for rehabilitation; specifically, that self-change occurs not only through self-appraisals and attributions but also from the reactions and reflected appraisals of others. Similarly, this theme points to the importance of external validators of change.

8. Theme 5: Context hampering change

Experiences of TSP cannot be considered in isolation. They are not divorced from the broader prison context. Prison climate has been linked to a range of outcomes, including programme participation, completion, and desistance (Kaiser et al., 2024; Blagden et al., 2016). This theme gives an overview of the ways in which the wider prison environment seemingly interacted (and often conflicted) with TSP aims and desired outcomes, including prisoner perceptions, expressed concerns about confidentiality and safety, and feelings of support.

8.1 Sub-theme 5.1: Feeling vulnerable, ambivalent and apprehensive

TSP group rooms were not experienced as separate and impermeable to the rest of the prison, but as part of the establishment fabric. Participants, regardless of gender or ethnicity, often expressed a sense of fear and vulnerability around how 'on-programme' disclosures and breaches of confidentiality could threaten their place within prison.

> "[initially didn't disclose] because you can't guarantee if you say something in the group session there's gonna be one person that says he said such a thing on the wing… couple of times a fight happened in there and so and then it makes you you don't wanna go you don't wanna do it." **[Participant 7]**

> "Now to be honest with you [Prison name] is not a very good place to go to try and get on this course… I thought to meself I'm not going to enjoy it, I was guarded, I'm a shy person… Know what I mean I'm very embarrassed if someone looks at my writing know what I mean. I'm embarrassed by it… But three people [on the group] were like we know what you mean, they helped us out, you know. They were all really one step ahead of me…I'm actually honest on what I'm gonna say without them three I don't think I'd have got through this course." **[Participant 30]**

A recurring theme for participants was the fear of opening up in group sessions, particularly early on in their TSP journeys. Openness in the group room was routinely

weighed against the risk of threat present on the wing, which created a form of tension, ambivalence, and apprehension. Participant 7 highlights how this feeling can be compounded by group tensions and, on very rare occasions, threats of violence. There were also personal reasons for not disclosing in the group including, as expressed by Participant 30 above, a sense of embarrassment about one's performance on TSP. However, such barriers to engagement, whilst important, were generally short lived, with most participants claiming that such feelings dissipated within a few sessions as they acclimatised to the programme group.

At times, the prison environment itself was a barrier to implementing learning and even when TSP skills had been learned and internalised, some participants found it safer to hide behavioural changes when outside the programme environment.

> "I kind of have to put it on whilst I'm on the wing. I have to adopt a different sort of mask, personality when I'm around people for like myself because, yeah, because you don't want to stand out here with your peers, accusations can start flying and you have to adopt a certain facade to blend into the environment."
> **[Participant 40]**

Participant 40 highlights how sometimes participants hid feelings and learning to "blend into the environment". The "wearing of masks" and having to camouflage into the prison environment could be a potential barrier to enacting and rehearsing learning from TSP. In addition, while this was not prevalent within the data for this study, a small number of male participants mentioned protecting their position through projecting a masculine image, which could be threatened by being seen to apply TSP skills. Schwaebe (2005) stressed the need to understand prisoners and the context of their treatment, in order to understand the limits of them benefiting from prison-based programmes. Indeed, the broader environment is typically overlooked, when considering the limits to intervention in prison (Mann et al., 2019). Related to the context of TSP, some participants expressed a sense of suspicion and struggled to believe they were not being covertly tested on the programme by, for example, parole or probation staff.

> "You've got to be careful with how you word things to get you... to not get you trapped as such. I think a lot of people will have fear on what they open up about, because we can all have... as humans we can all have some pretty dark thoughts. But when we talk about our thoughts, deep like, if it's probation connected, which this course is connected with probation, let's say I'm talking about a situation for example, 'ah, I want to kill him'. Listen... we may be having that thought but it's reacting and thinking about it are two different, completely different things. If I said that, that would be relayed onto my probation." **[Participant 46]**

In summary, these ambivalences seemingly threatened some participants' willingness to trust, open-up and authentically engage with TSP, standing at odds with the prerequisite behaviours expected in the programme for learning to successfully occur (open, active, respectful, and supportive participation). That said, as highlighted by other themes in this report, these challenges can be mitigated through open, honest, and genuine therapeutic relationships and cohesive group dynamics.

> "There were quite a few lads in there that never that didn't really speak that much they were really quiet at the first couple sessions then after they opened up slowly but surely…there was like one in particular person it was a few like three or four but one particular person couldn't really grasp the concept of what we was saying and somebody helped him and then said yeah we understand what you're saying. That that resonated with him I think like "oh no people aren't gonna laugh at me they aren't gonna" and like he just continued to improve to the point where he was participating, he was engaging…I feel like the group did that 'cause we had patience." **[Participant 26]**

Here, Participant 26 exemplifies the important role of other group members in engaging and progressing in TSP, once again highlighting the important role of group dynamics in group-based intervention. There is a large body of research which points to the cohesiveness of the group in therapy as a moderator of therapeutic outcomes (Yalom, 1995; Marmarosh et al., 2005).

8.2 Sub-theme 5.2: Opportunities to develop off-programme support

This theme captured participants' perspectives on the availability of support beyond TSP. Most notably in this theme, participants referred to poorer quality relationships and interactions with non-programmes staff, as well as the absence of additional TSP-like opportunities for continued learning and development.

Prison officers play a pivotal role in the prison climate (Small, 2023) and rehabilitative aims are most effectively achieved when prisoners feel supported by prison staff (Blagden, 2023; Small, 2023). However, while participants often discussed strong therapeutic relationships during TSP, and some received supportive acknowledgement from prison officers and noted how valuable this had felt (see Theme 4), this was, at times, contrasted against a backdrop of perceived indifference from wider prison staff.

> "The jail itself… negative comments or nickings if you know what I mean. But if you're doing anything good, or you've gone above and beyond or you start to change the way you act or you speak, you don't get acknowledged for it. You don't get someone – I'm not saying we need a pat on the back we're all fully grown women, but it's nice for someone to talk to us and say you know you've done really well." **[Participant 36]**

> "You get some officers so like, it's not that they just don't care like, it's more they think programmes are sh*t, they don't think they work." **[Participant 27]**

While there is an important theme of staff validation within the data, this theme highlights the counterpoint and the differential experience of staff within different prisons. Around 20% (10 out of 50) of participants interviewed perceived staff indifference as a hindrance to engagement, or as something which left them feeling unsupported. Importantly, female participants interviewed felt particularly unsupported with the emotional intensity of TSP, with all female participants describing how they found the programme emotionally challenging, and at times upsetting. This typically meant they needed a proportionate amount of post-session support from wider prison staff, external to TSP. However, several female participants described uncompassionate reactions to their signs of distress.

Participant 36 outlines how the lack of support, coupled with the emotional intensity of TSP, “broke” her and almost resulted in her needing to leave the programme. The emotional intensity of TSP was a clear gender difference identified in this study, with female participants typically experiencing this more intensely, some of which seemed to be due to multiple past traumas. It appeared, at least from this small sample of female TSP completers, that they experienced the programme differently to males and that some of the content, if not appropriately tailored, could be construed as insensitive. This suggests that it is important for programmes to be gender-responsive, and that there also needs to be adequate emotional support from wider prison staff beyond programme sessions.

> “My crime was committed I was only a child and a lot of things happened to me that I had to just go through in here. And then I’m discussing it here and then I’m leaving here where’s the support? There’s no support whatsoever and I think that’s really, really hard, to the point where my OMU (Offender Management Unit) worker was discussing taking me out off the course. (…) I don’t cry I don’t get upset but it broke me.” **[Participant 36]**

Some participants interviewed also described being addressed by prison officers in derogatory ways. This appears a genuine challenge for TSP skills enactment as some participants struggled to reconcile TSP learning and expectations, particularly around conflict resolution through dialogue and staff responses. Approximately 20% (10 out of 50) of participants gave specific examples of derogatory language or behaviours from prison officers, and described how, in these instances, they could be tempted to ignore TSP learning. Some felt provoked into outbursts, feeding cycles of punitive responses and unhelpful prisoner-staff relationships.

> “I can see how some people it could drag them down and it could make them go back to their old ways, do you know what I mean. Like when you go to a member of staff, you speak to your manager and respecting him, and in return he speaks to you like he don’t value you. That’s when someone’s got a decision to make there.” **[Participant 26]**

Thus, prisoners’ interactions with prison officers can either be barriers or enablers to wider TSP aims. Findings here point to a need for staff on residential units (wings and house

blocks) to support pro-social behaviour, and model this consistently themselves. This appears to be a wider organisational requirement, in ensuring prisoners are supported to actively try out, practice, refine and maintain their skills.

Beyond these issues, participants also referred to how conducive the prison was to their learning of TSP content. Broadly, whilst some participants found some aspects of TSP to be intensive, in discussing their experience of the programme itself, they had a generally positive response to course scheduling and pacing. However, participants considered that TSP skills are likely to be forgotten or eroded if not used and practiced.

> "It's like maths, if you don't do it on a regular basis you start forgetting certain aspects of it" **[Participant 38]**

More than a quarter of participants (26%, 13 out of 50) emphasised the need for ongoing support to sustain positive change, such as drop-in sessions and refresher courses, with many feeling that this was lacking, thereby hampering their sense of growth. Indeed, some participants struggled at this time with feelings of limbo, lack of progression, and futility. Participants discussed how they were expecting to progress through the prison system after TSP, but that this had not occurred. This structural barrier could give the sense that TSP does not help with prison progression.

> "If I'm willing to work with you why aren't I… It might have progressed us personally but in me prison life it hasn't (…) The jail gives out a lot of false hope (…) what I would like them to do is saying TSP might benefit you but there's no guarantee." **[Participant 4]**

Participant 4 acknowledges the benefits to his personal life but nonetheless describes frustration when participation on TSP did not result in prison recategorisation. He requests that the belief that TSP reliably ensures progress within the prison system, (a view commonly held by participants), be clearly addressed before the programme. This was also echoed by other participants. While this is stated to TSP participants in programme information documents from the outset, the messaging may at times need reiterating and verbally communicating to increase the perception of transparency. For some participants, a further structural barrier was the lack of post-programme support, which is needed to

maintain a sense of motivation and purpose, and ultimately reinforce long-term goals of desistance.

> "There's got to be some progression afterwards, maybe even I'm saying another course or maybe, but something where you're applying yourself but you're keeping it in mind. (…) There's got to be a link. An afterwards link to, to, you've got to keep on that path." **[Participant 33]**

> "There needs to be refreshers… I needed the refresher to show me like how to look for red flags." **[Participant 7]**

The above extracts highlight a theme within the data in which participants desired voluntary drop-in sessions or further post-programme support to assist with keeping skills fresh. While some participants discussed how they experienced such post-programme support, this was not uniform and pointed to differences in practice.

> "Umm, not really, apart from like I say, the refreshers, which's only been started, I think the third one next week I think it is ("How many sessions do you get?") You get one, it's one every two weeks." **[Participant 17]**

While refreshers were important and valued by the participants who had experienced them, they were not available to all participants and initiatives varied between prisons. The main reason for this was because TSP does not require post-programme support sessions as a mandatory feature of its design, and local efforts to provide such services ad-hoc are generally subject to local resourcing arrangements which can vary from prison to prison.

9. Implications for programme delivery

9.1 Contributions to knowledge of TSP

This qualitative evaluation presents several contributions to existing literature, with important implications for policy and practice. A key contribution is how it has contextualised the effects of TSP reported in recent large-scale matched-comparison impact evaluations (e.g. Brinn et al. 2023; Elliot et al. 2023), by exploring how and why the programme can help participants develop pro-social skills and behaviour. This is crucial as it provides the bedrock for learning and implications for policy and practice consideration (see next section). As discussed, the study identifies adjustments which could enhance learning and retention, relative to aspects of group allocation, staff-participant relationships, accessibility and inclusivity, barriers to sustaining change, and opportunities to enact change.

A second important contribution is an in-depth analysis of the prison environment in which TSP takes place. As discussed in the Introduction, while the effect of the prison environment and prisoner-staff relationships on learning are well-documented (Blagden & Penford, in press; Blagden et al., 2016), there is a research gap in the precise ways the environment itself can facilitate or hinder learning. This qualitative evaluation identifies actionable areas in which the prison environment interacted with the aims of TSP, and a clear relationship to possible adjustments.

9.2 Gender

As discussed in Section 3.3 method limitations, attendance was lower for female participants, however, the study includes interviews with six females. This is comparable to Barnett's (2012) qualitative analysis of the experiences of women on TSP (outlined in the Introduction) and compares favourably with the ratio of male to female prisoners in England and Wales. This sample was sufficient to suggest gendered aspects to the experience of TSP (see Main Theme 5), which could be a relevant avenue for further research. The consistent theme was the emotionality of TSP and the need for additional

emotional support during the programme, particularly considering the prevalence of trauma experienced by female prisoners (MoJ, 2025).

9.3 Ethnicity

Ethnicity was an integral design consideration for this project. Firstly, the quota sampling strategy utilised for recruitment set targets for specific ethnic groups, to diversify the sample and reflect the demographic of participants that engage with TSP. Secondly, the interview schedule integrated questions and prompts that sought to capture how and whether TSP was sufficiently adapted and inclusive for people from different ethnic backgrounds. Despite these design features, the analysis did not identify any clear divergences of experience that directly related to people's ethnicity or culture. A prevailing sentiment expressed by participants was that TSP content, group dynamics and cohesion were unaffected by cultural or ethnic differences. Although ethnicity was an important consideration for this study, we were unable to recruit any women from ethnic minority groups and so their voice remains marginalised in accredited programme research (Barnett, 2012).

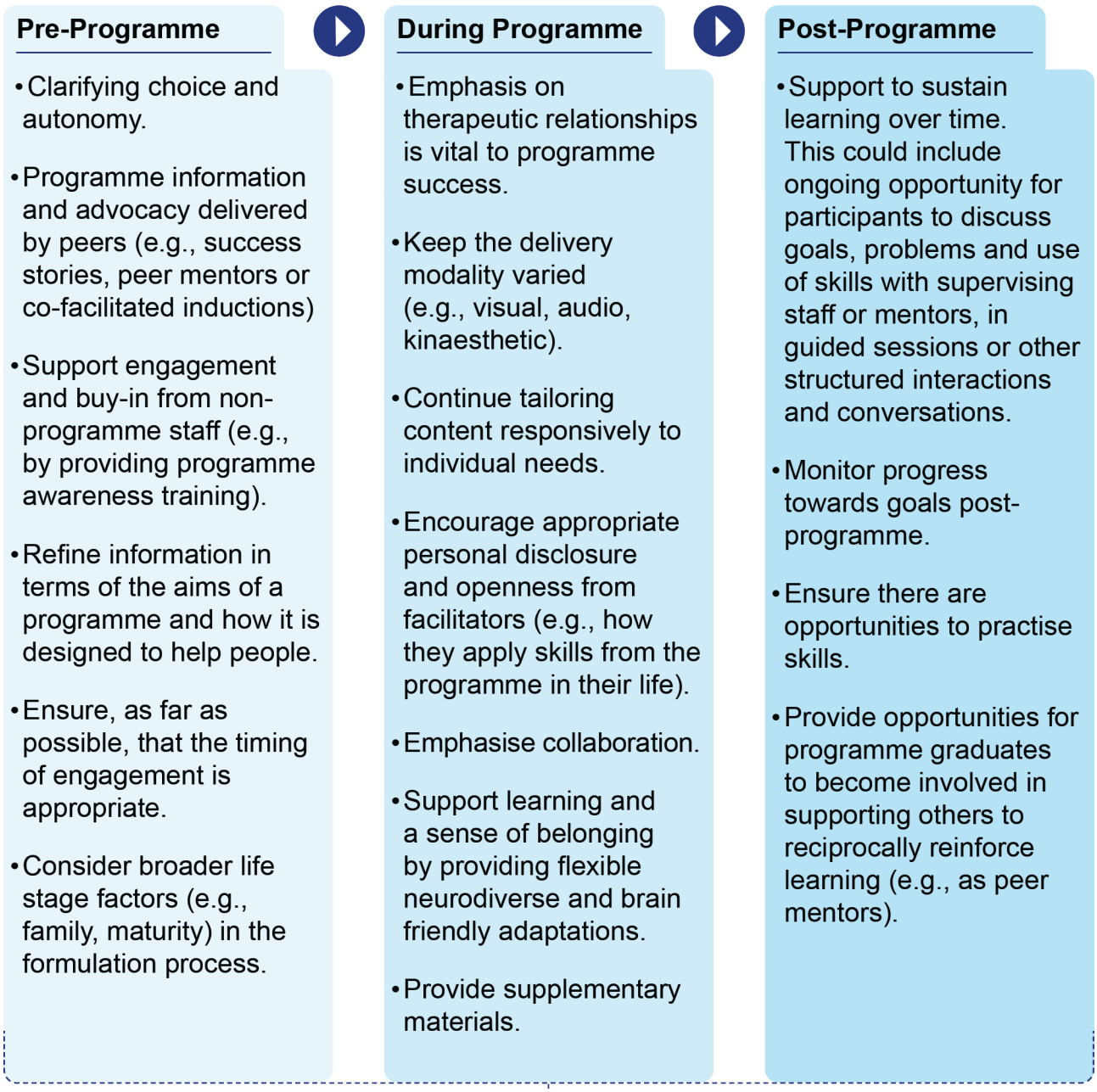
9.4 Non-completion of TSP

Despite active efforts to include those who had started but not completed TSP in the sample, all participants who took part in the research had begun and completed the programme. There is therefore the potential for sampling bias in the perspectives represented (as discussed in Methodology, section 3.3). Despite this, the analysis revealed that many participants reported shyness, embarrassment, or lack of motivation, therefore suggesting that the findings do capture a diversity of experiences within the programme. It can be supposed that people who did not complete TSP would highlight barriers to engaging, which therefore merits further research, despite the practical constraints in reaching this population.

10. Implications for programme delivery

The findings in this qualitative evaluation have emphasised the importance of readiness, motivation, relationships (therapeutic, personal and with wider prison staff) and the opportunities to apply skills and learning outside of the programme group room. Intervention success will always rely, to some extent, on the *positive support* of intervention and non-intervention staff who can encourage, motivate, support, and provide opportunities for participants to practice and rehearse the skills learnt on a programme (Ware & Galouzis, 2019). The good practice pointers emanating from this evaluation highlight several key issues for bolstering the effectiveness of accredited offending behaviour programmes (such as, but not limited to, TSP) *before*, *during*, and *after* their delivery (see Figure 1). The good practice pointers, for consideration, need to be underpinned by a positive prison climate which provides the opportunity to practice and rehearse new learning acquired on a programme.

Figure 1: Key good practice pointers and considerations



11. Conclusion

To conclude, through an in-depth exploration of TSP participants' lived experiences, this qualitative evaluation found that TSP was perceived to be delivered by engaged and interested staff, and useful to participants in helping them develop skills for change. Findings must be considered in light of the limitations set out earlier in this report.

This qualitative study identified several themes. These related to (1) factors underpinning readiness to engage with the programme; (2), the pivotal role of programme facilitators and relationships in rehabilitation; (3), the process of developing new insights and goals; (4), examples of the utility and application of skills from TSP in participants' lives; (5) and broader issues associated with prisons as a context for rehabilitation. From these themes, five key areas for operational consideration were identified. Firstly, the appropriate timing of offering TSP was highlighted as an important precursor to authentic motivation to engage. Secondly, findings reinforce the importance of genuine, supportive therapeutic relationships between facilitators and participants to enhance programme experiences and engagement. Thirdly, related to support, post-programme follow-up sessions, including structured interactions and guided conversations with supervising staff was identified as a potentially useful means for programme graduates to continue to maintain and integrate the skills they had learned into their daily life. The fourth area for consideration pertained to addressing barriers during TSP, both individual (e.g., responding to individual learning needs) and structural (e.g., consistent provision of structural support across different prison sites), that could impact engagement and progression through the programme. Finally, it became clear that the broader prison context was an impactful responsivity dimension of participants' experiences, with an emphasis on the importance of providing awareness training to non-programme prison staff to help them support and model positive interactions with programme participants.

Overall, these five key areas have been devised as suggestions to holistically augment service delivery before, during, and after a programme, by building on the existing

strengths of TSP and ensuring comprehensive support for participants throughout their rehabilitation journey, within and beyond the programme itself.

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Appendix 1
The Correctional Advice and Accreditation Panel

The Correctional Services Accreditation and Advice Panel (CSAAP) comprises independent international academics and expert practitioners who advise HMPPS on accrediting programmes for use across prisons and probation. CSAAP also provide independent, evidence-based advice on programme development and practice. The Ministry of Justice uses accreditation to provide confidence that its offending behaviour programmes are designed based on the best available evidence, will be delivered as intended, and will be evaluated to show the outcomes that are being met. The HMPPS Rehabilitation Strategy Board accredit programmes for implementation across prisons and probation.

Once an accredited programme has been running for a sufficient amount of time, CSAAP considers the impact of the programme when deciding whether to recommend that the programme maintains accreditation. If CSAAP do not recommend that the programme maintains accreditation, HMPPS may consider withdrawing the programme.

Programmes are assessed using the evidence-based principles for effective interventions. The Accreditation Criteria are laid out below.

The requirements for accreditation state that programmes and services must demonstrate that they:

1. Are evidence-based and/or have a credible rationale
2. Address factors relevant to reoffending and desistance
3. Are targeted at appropriate participants
4. Develop new skills (as opposed to only raising awareness)
5. Motivate, engage, and retain participants
6. Are delivered as intended by staff with appropriate skills and quality assured, via:
    a. a quality assurance plan,
    b. by providing quality assurance findings
7. Are evaluated, via:
    a. an evaluation plan, and
    b. by providing results of evaluation

Appendix 2
TSP qualitative sample and data collection

TSP study sample

Table 3. below sets out the eight prison and young offender institution (YOI) sites included in the study. Table 4. provides information on the study participant's primary proven office type.

Table 3: Prison sites used as sampling frames for study participant recruitment

Prison	Prison characteristics	N
PRISON A	Security Class: Category C Prisoner population: Adult males	6
PRISON B	Security Class: Category C Prisoner population: Adult males	6
PRISON C	Security Class: Category C Prisoner population: Adult and young adult males	5
PRISON D	Security Class: Category C Prisoner population: Adult males	9
PRISON E	Security Class: Category C Prisoner population: Adult and young adult males	11
PRISON F	Security Class: Category C Prisoner population: Adult males	7
PRISON G	Security Class: Closed Prisoner population: Adult and young adult females	2
PRISON H	Security Class: Closed Prisoner population: Adult and young adult females	4

Table 4: Frequency table of study participants' primary proven offences

Offence	N
Robbery, burglary, theft	17 (34%)
Wounding (inc. racially aggravated)	12 (24%)
Murder	3 (6%)
Recalled	3 (6%)
Death by dangerous driving	2 (4%)

Offence	N
Affray	1 (2%)
Breach of non-molestation order	1 (2%)
Criminal damage	1 (2%)
Drug related offence(s)	7 (14%)
Arrange/facilitate the prostitution of a child	1 (2%)
Arson	1 (2%)
Drunk and disorderly in a public place	1 (2%)

TSP study data collection interview procedure

Prior to the commencement of data collection, the project was subject to a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA), and ethical approvals were granted by the University of Derby College Research Ethics Committee and the Ministry of Justice. Key information about the research, what participation involved, data handling, risks and benefits of participation were summarised in a participant information document. Points of contact at each prison were approached via email and were asked to distribute the participant information document to any individuals who had graduated from TSP in the 12 months prior. In total 58 prisoners (49 Male, 9 Female) expressed initial interest and consented. Staff in the programmes department at each prison, arranged suitable interview dates and times for participants and researchers. After this initial response, 02 individuals (86%) attended and completed interviews. This equated to 44% of females either not attending or refusing an interview, whereas for males this was only 8%.

One-to-one, semi-structured interviews were completed on-site with participants in appropriate spaces identified by programme staff. Typically, these were rooms used for programmes and/or one-to-one supervision work (e.g., offender management meeting rooms). Upon arrival for interview, following initial rapport-building conversations, participants were provided with a written and verbal outline of the research and the opportunity to ask questions. At this point, to encourage openness, researchers emphasised that they were independent of HMPPS, and that responses given during interviews would not have an impact on their status in prisons, or their sentence progression. Researchers also reinforced the voluntary nature of the interviews, ensuring that participants understood their rights to withdrawal without repercussions. They were

then asked to complete and sign an informed consent form before the commencement of interviews, with additional verbal confirmation of consent sought for the audio recording of interviews. In-depth, one-to-one interviews were conducted by a team of five researchers, consistently guided by a semi-structured schedule of open-ended interview questions and prompts. Interviews aimed to holistically capture participants' TSP journey, including the period around their initial decision to join the programme, their experiences during the programme, and those after the programme, referred to as 'post-programme'. Within this, topics such as motivation, relationships with others on and beyond the programme, responsivity, personal relevancy, enablers and barriers to participation, the impact of the prison environment, and application of learning were explored in-depth (see Appendix 3). Interviews were digitally recorded onto encrypted Dictaphones, lasting approximately one hour, and were transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis.

TSP study data analysis

A form of consensus coding and inter-coder agreement was used as a verification procedure to check coding and consistency of interpretation of the qualitative data (de Wet & Erasmus, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was a necessary step given the large amount of data produced by the research interviews (over 60 hours). The process of inter-coder agreement occurs when two or more researchers code the same data (or aspects of the data) independently and check for consistency (de Wet & Erasmus, 2005). In this study coding was conducted by all authors of the report, with the first two authors overseeing the coding for all transcripts. Author 3 coded transcripts 1–15, author 4 transcripts 16–30, and author 5 transcripts 30–52. Each coder independently analysed the transcripts, then shared coding and themes in data analysis sessions, where the coders collaboratively discussed emerging codes/themes, as well as both similarities and differences in data analysis. Each transcript was either coded twice or coded by one author and then checked by one of the first two authors. In this evaluation, there were no substantial differences in the codes produced (other than semantic differences) and there was consistency in the types of codes and themes emerging. This rigorous dialogical process helped to produce safeguards against bias, allowed for a greater understanding of the data, and ultimately enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). In keeping with Braun and Clarke's (2021) guidance, final

themes (see Table 2 in the main body of the report) represented coherent patterns across participants' interviews, were underpinned by clear, unifying central organising concepts, and were confirmed through consensus to be representative of the data.

Appendix 3
Research interview schedule

Background

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself (details that you are comfortable sharing), what a typical day in this prison looks like for you...

2. How long has been since you did the TSP programme?

3. Tell me a little about why you decided to do the TSP programme?

4. How did you find out about TSP?
   a. What were your initial expectations?

Programme experiences and personal relevance

5. Tell us about your journey through the TSP programme.
   a. What was it like for you and what were the most important aspects?
   b. What learning did you take from the course?
   c. We will explore more of this in detail later in the interview…

6. Can you give me an example of how you've applied something you have learned from TSP to your life or a situation that you've recently experienced?

7. What part, if any, of TSP had the greatest impact on you?
   a. In what way? Why that part…

8. What part of TSP had the least impact on you?
   a. In what way?

9. Is there anything you would change about TSP?

10. What has helped you the most from TSP since completing the programme?

11. Has there been anything which has hindered your progress after completing TSP?

12. Do you feel that TSP was relevant to you and looked at problems that are important to you? *For example, were the exercises and programme materials useful for you personally, given your gender and ethnic background?*

13. Do you think that TSP was useful for you and would be helpful with your future goals?
    a. Could you see yourself using the things you have learnt from TSP to help you in the future?

14. Were the conditions of success explained to you?
    a. Did you feel you understood what they were?

TSP Motivation

15. How motivated were you to engage and join in with the programme? What could have helped with this?
    a. Did you try out new skills as a result of participating in TSP?

16. Did your level of motivation to change develop or change in any way through being on the programme?
    a. How did it change?

17. Did you feel like you had an opportunity to participate and learn in the sessions? Were you able to participate fully?

Safety, support & inclusivity

18. Thinking about the group sessions versus the individual sessions, how safe or secure did you feel to be able to talk about yourself, or your life and your experiences? Did you feel able to disclose details about your background e.g. diversity?

19. Did you experience any oppressive or threatening behaviours or statements in the group sessions?
    a. If so, did the facilitators challenge them enough?

20. How supported did you feel by the facilitator in the group and individual sessions?
    a. Did they support you to engage during the group sessions?
    b. How did they support you in other ways, for example outside of the sessions?

21. Did you feel able to talk openly about personally relevant situations, for example family, community, faith, gender, and cultural identity, during group and individual sessions? If not why….

22. Were you able to open up during group and individual sessions? Did you feel like your contributions were welcomed?

23. How inclusive or not inclusive did you find TSP? For example, did you feel recognised and valued in group or individual sessions? Were there any differences discussing things within the group to discussing things in individual sessions?

24. Did you feel that gender or diversity was recognised during the sessions?
    a. Do you feel that it was respected in the sessions?
    b. Do you remember whether the facilitator specifically mentioned or acknowledged diversities during either group or individual sessions?

Relationships and Opportunities for Change

25. How responsive or not responsive is TSP? For example, do you think that the programme accommodated people's individual needs?
    a. Do you feel that facilitators matched the delivery of the course to the individual needs of participants?
    b. Do you feel like reasonable adjustments were made so that the course was accessible to individuals for example, minority ethnic groups or gender?
    c. Do you feel like the facilitator understood your strengths and needs?

26. How do you think the TSP has changed your thinking, attitudes, and behaviour? *Can you give an example of how this has happened….*

27. Did being on the TSP programme impact or change your relationships with staff on the wing (or any other staff)?

28. To what extent has the TSP programme impacted on other relationships in your life? *In what ways…*

29. Do you feel the prison gives you opportunities to practise skills or learning from the programme?
    a. In what ways? Could you give me an example?

30. Have you had the opportunity to try out your new thinking skills to make meaningful choices and set pro social goals since being on TSP?
    a. How have you applied your new skills?
    b. Do you feel committed to continue using these new skills to change your life?

Wrapping up

31. In your view, how effective is the TSP in achieving its aims?
    a. What makes you say that?

32. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience on the TSP programme?