

Lived Experience Advisory

Report

UKRI Imagining Possible Futures

The advisory board guided priorities using coproduced song, poetry and a visual ‘wall’. Here is what this means for our research.

Advisory board: Kemi, Tasha, Catherine, Marcus, Rohan, Oliver, Kiera.
https://www.reformed16.com/

FOREWORD – Gill Buck, Principal Investigator

From the beginning, our UKRI study included plans to recruit a community-based lived experience advisory board, led by Kemi and Tasha at Reformed. While the aims of the overall study had already been established and described to our funders, the board was intended to shape how the research developed and what it paid attention to. However, as relationships grew, I was reminded that I was a novice in this knowledge space, being inducted by a community whose understanding was grounded in lived and embodied experiences. At the same time, I held the resources and institutional authority. That tension was difficult to ignore. There was also a broader question: if people with firsthand experience possess expertise that researchers need, what does it mean to seek their "advice"? Too often, involvement happens once the direction of travel is already set, using formal research structures. We wanted to create an inclusive space for people to influence research at an earlier stage, helping to identify what matters, what is missing, and where attention should be directed.

Although Kemi and Tasha had been recruited to lead the advisory work, the original training programme and meeting structure had been designed by me. We therefore revisited the plans for the advisory board together. The training offer evolved to open new opportunities and futures for advisor leads, while the advisory process became less formal, more relational, and more responsive to people's strengths. This highlighted the vital role of community practitioners as research leaders and fellows. Skilled in building trust, nurturing relationships and providing person-centred support, they created the conditions for people to contribute their knowledge and experiences. Their work enabled forms of participation and advice that are often inaccessible through conventional research structures.

The creative approaches featured here emerged through this collaborative process. Kemi was clear from the outset about the importance of a visual “wall”, while both Tasha and Kemi had long used poetry as a way of healing, reflection and communication. Drawing on previous learning from photovoice and song-based projects, Emma Murray (Co-Investigator) and I were able to introduce photography and collaborative songwriting as additional ways of exploring what mattered to the group.

These forms of advice asked something different of us as researchers. They required us to stop, listen and feel differently. Rather than focusing on agendas or consultation exercises, knowledge was generated through creative and collective reflection. The songwriting, photography and poetry presented here therefore grew from a decision to share greater control over how research priorities were identified and communicated without collaborators requiring familiarity with academic language or research processes**.** These creative methods created space for people to share knowledge in their own words, helping to ensure that research priorities were grounded in everyday experience. The poem that closes this resource serves as a final reflection from those who helped lead this work.

SONG | Breaking Chains

Working collaboratively with the wonderful MIRI[1], a singer-songwriter, creative practitioner and campaigner, advisors used songwriting to explore the issues that mattered most to them. Combining personal reflection with creative expression helped advisors to communicate insights and research priorities in an accessible, engaging and emotionally resonant way:

Intro
Do you think you know me?
Have you walked my track?
This journey nearly broke me
But I made my way back
Step into my shoes
Walk this road I've been through
Before you judge the story
Ask what the system did too

Chorus
Breaking Chains
Making Change
Breaking Chains
Making Change

Everybody has a story
Everyone's going through a process
Breaking Chains
Everybody has a story
Everyone's going through a process
Making change

Verse 1
I've been through some real pain
I've seen people not make it through
Now it's time to (Backing Vocals: Make A Change)
And together we will stop the system from making gains
One step forward, never look back again
I'm so sorry for what I've done in the past
That was the first and the last
Please forgive me
Don't let my past keep following me
Life is just like a piece of cake
I promise I will never make that same mistake

Verse 2
Internal Healing Reconnecting with strangers
The sentence starts when you're released
Got to release yourself
Removing the labels...
New creation
Seeing beyond the box
Up against the clock

Remember you're a human behind that box
Don't live up to the label
Using your pain for a purpose
Rehabilitate, time is weird
Going through the tunnel of hope
A dove with no wings
Everyone has a story
Everyone has a process

Chorus
Breaking Chains
Making Change
Breaking Chains
Making Change
Everybody has a story
Everyone's going through a process
Breaking Chains
Everybody has a story
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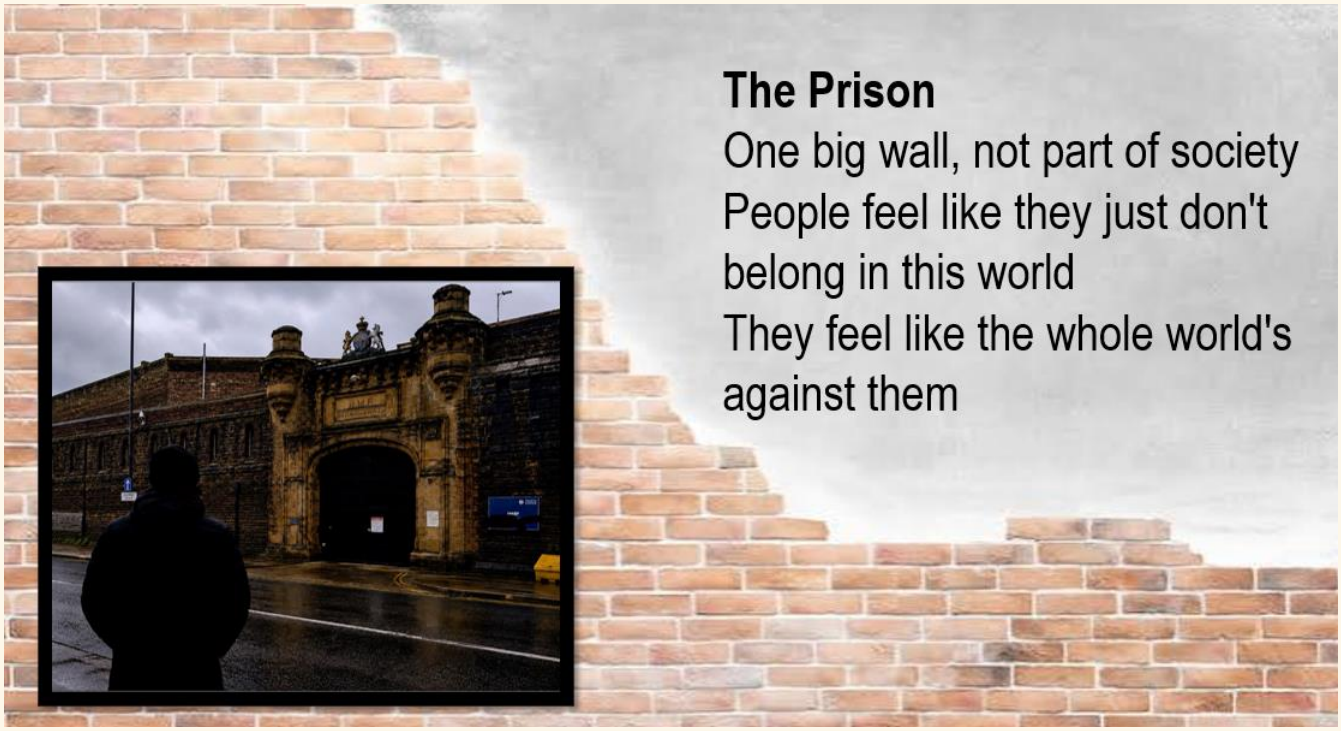
Verse 3
Everyone has a process to take you to the next level
Not enough education
Extra layer of discrimination
Race, gender, age, postcode, religion, class
Trained to find a way out of Marginilisation
Always carrying that piece of paper
That DBS check, spent, is it really?
Navigate back to society
Emotionally unprepared and unaware
Systemic repeated cycle
Created to make you give up on hope
Cause and reflect
The root of the situation
What is the cause? Systems..lifestyle?

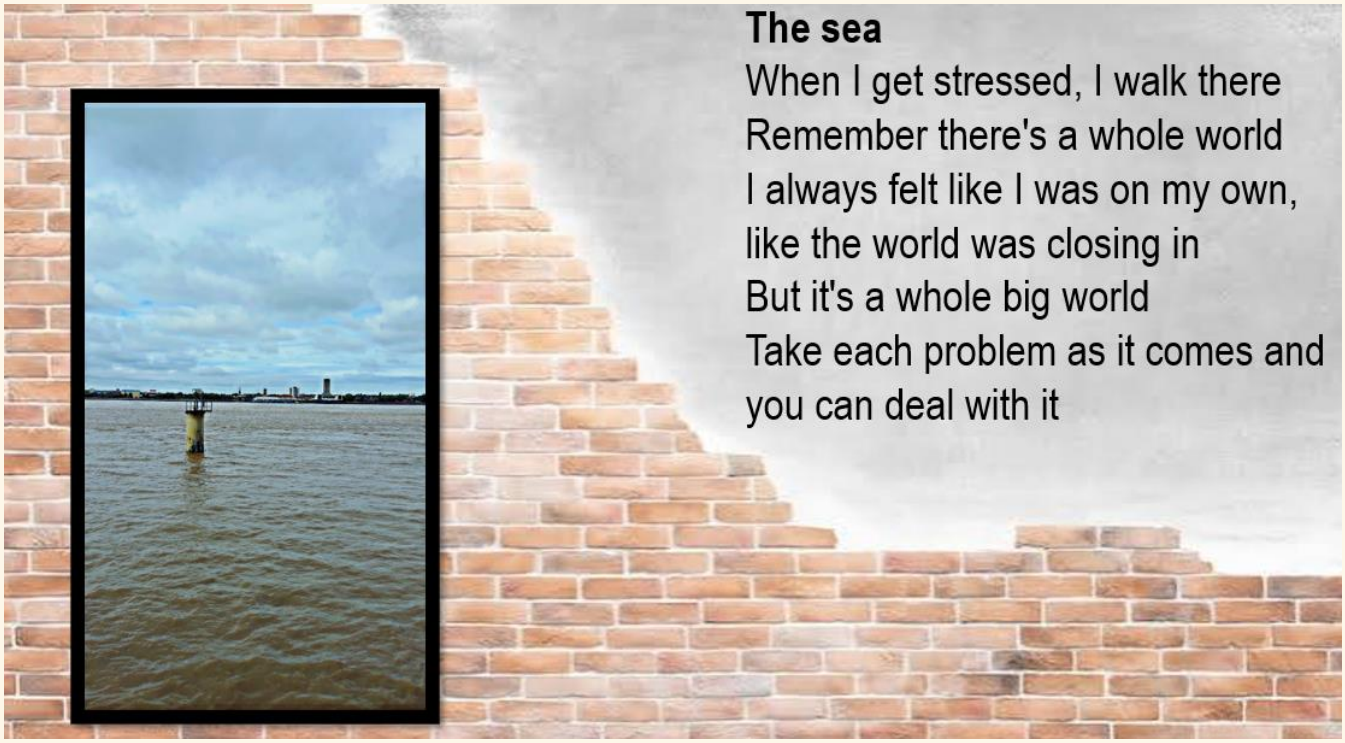
Outro
Change… Courage
Change… Hope
Change… Ability
Change… New
Change… Growth
Change… Evolve
Change… Now judge my story

[1] https://miriofficial.com/

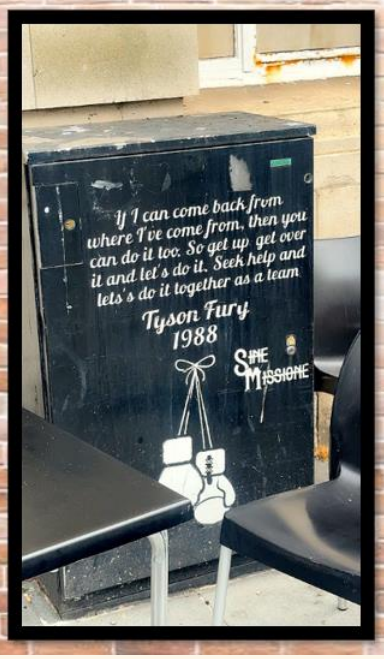
The Aftermath Wall

Building on the songwriting process, advisors used a photovoice approach[2] to explore the aftermath of a criminal conviction. Through photography, group discussion and reflection, advisors highlighted barriers, opportunities and areas for change, represented as **The Aftermath Wall**. Intentionally crumbling in places, the wall symbolises the possibility of barriers being broken down and communicates a collective vision to inform the research direction.





[2] https://photovoice.org/

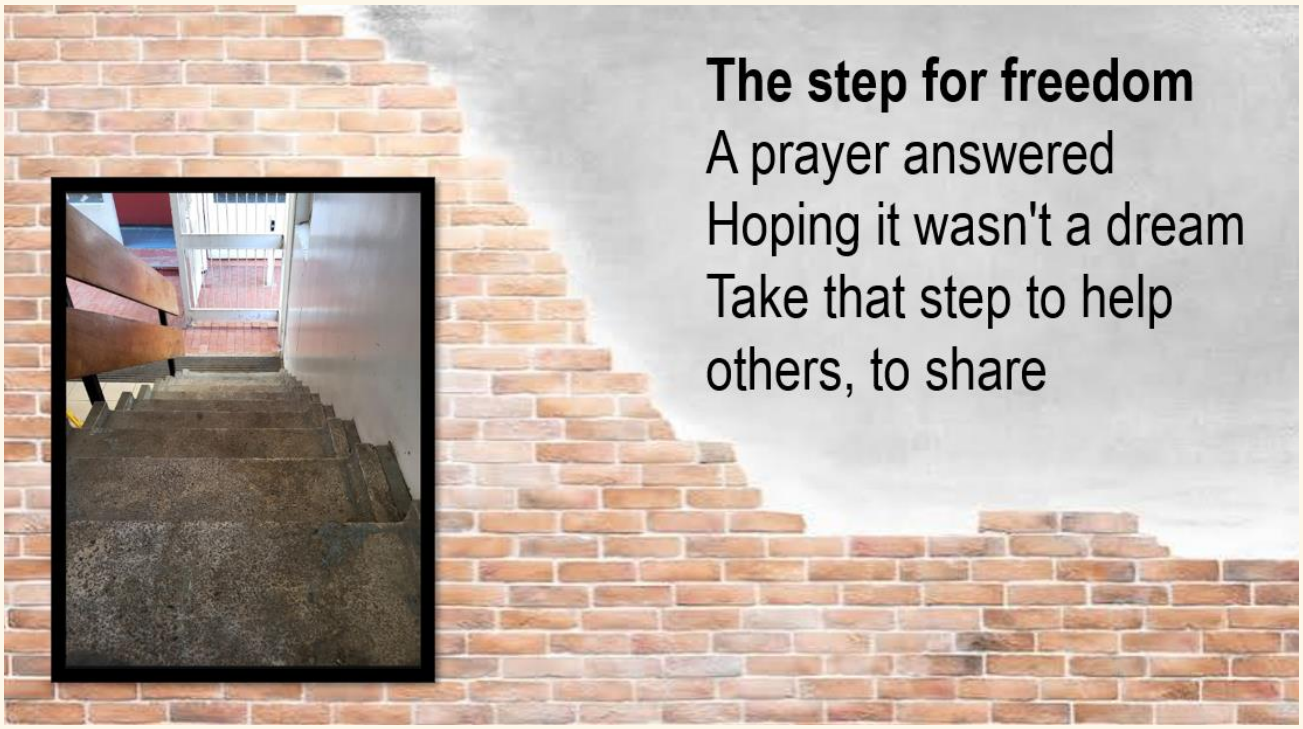


The quote

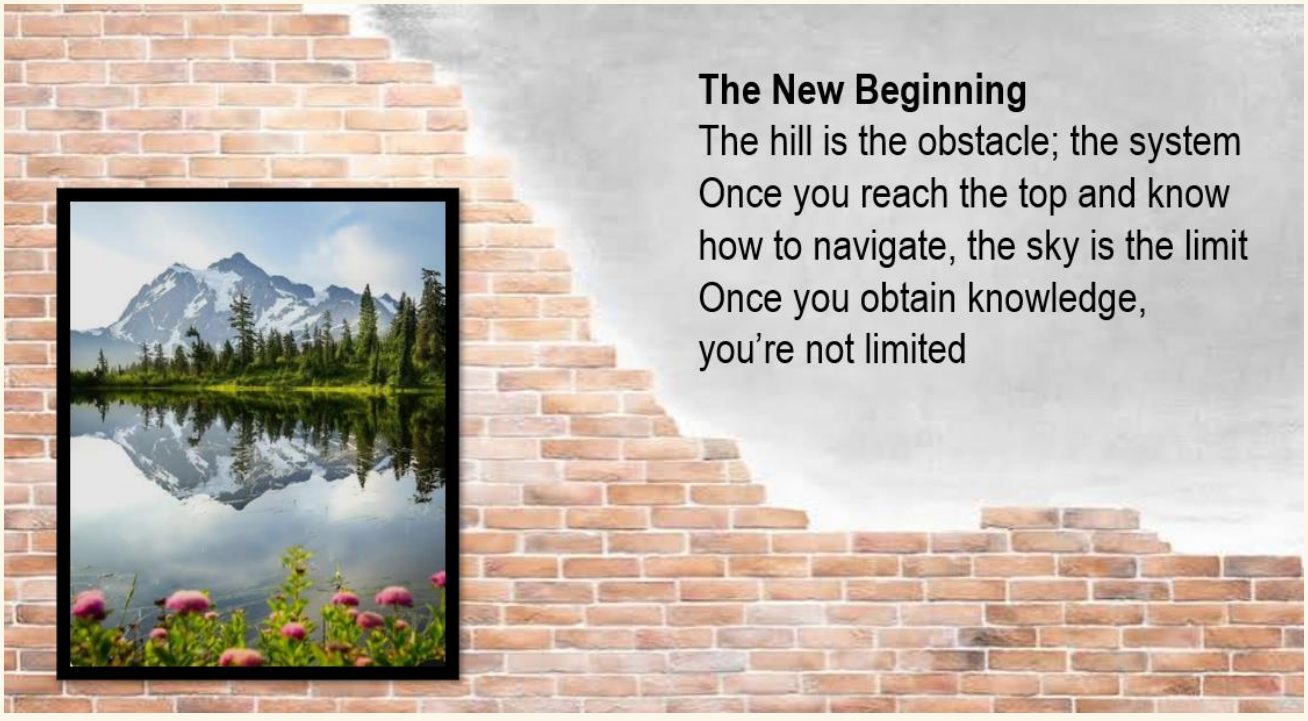
If you're feeling down, it reminds you other people have come through it
It gives you a hope
I used to be ashamed to ask for help
That quote is a lovely reminder that people have come through the other side, don't be scared to ask for help



My friend was gunned down for no reason, and it consumed me
The hatred I had for the world
It was unjust
My life spiralled out of control
That's where J passed away
I've been given a second chance, got to put it to use, can't carry on this hateful revenge lifestyle
So, we set up an organisation helping people overcome things that I did



The step for freedom
A prayer answered
Hoping it wasn't a dream
Take that step to help
others, to share



The New Beginning
The hill is the obstacle; the system
Once you reach the top and know
how to navigate, the sky is the limit
Once you obtain knowledge,
you're not limited

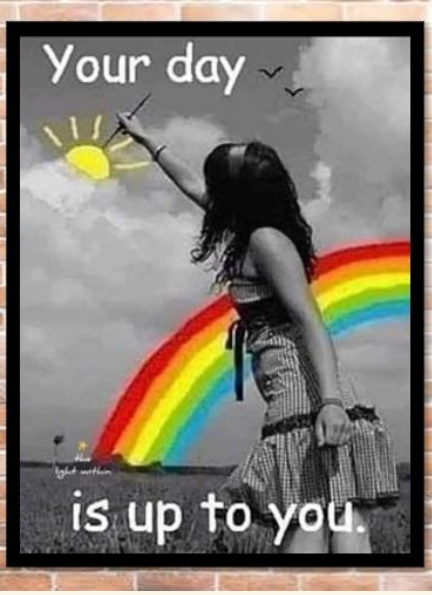


The plant

Represents healthy growth

Looking after your mindset, watering it

It's important to water yourself, but also find a spot where you can grow



Taking back power

Creating what *can* be, not what could have been

In the beginning, it was grey, no prospects, rejection…

Re-learning and discovering your own mind, a fruitful vision

You're the artist in your book

You hold the power to create, regardless of the criminal record

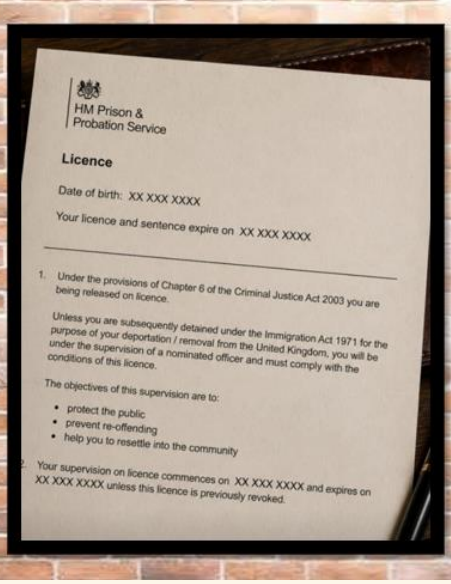


The flowers

The ocean to the soul of freedom
The depths of the journey overcoming, which is blossoming



Burdened by licence, denied chances, judged
I earned a Master's with distinction
The system gave me a number; I gave myself a future
The sentence doesn't end at the gate, chains still hold me
But walls cannot contain the mind
I am rebuilding, piecing myself back together
You're dragging all this weight, probation, license, homelessness, joblessness


HM Prison &
Probation Service

Licence

Date of birth: XX XXX XXXX

Your licence and sentence expire on XX XXX XXXX

1. Under the provisions of Chapter 6 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 you are being released on licence.

Unless you are subsequently detained under the Immigration Act 1971 for the purpose of your deportation / removal from the United Kingdom, you will be under the supervision of a nominated officer and must comply with the conditions of this licence.

The objectives of this supervision are to:

- protect the public
- prevent re-offending
- help you to resettle into the community

2. Your supervision on licence commences on XX XXX XXXX and expires on XX XXX XXXX unless this licence is previously revoked.

The Licence

You're released, excited,
Nobody considers that you're miles from your probation office
Mad dash, panic, phone call
Fear, overwhelming
Sign your life away, agree to restrictions
You're not really free



Clocks

This represents time
Time wasted, time stolen, time that I will never get back
Trying to make the most of time
Family, friends that you knew before, realising that time didn't stand still for them
It's difficult for everybody to understand each other



A chain and degree certificate

I am not going to be known as my prison number

The degree defines me, not the chain

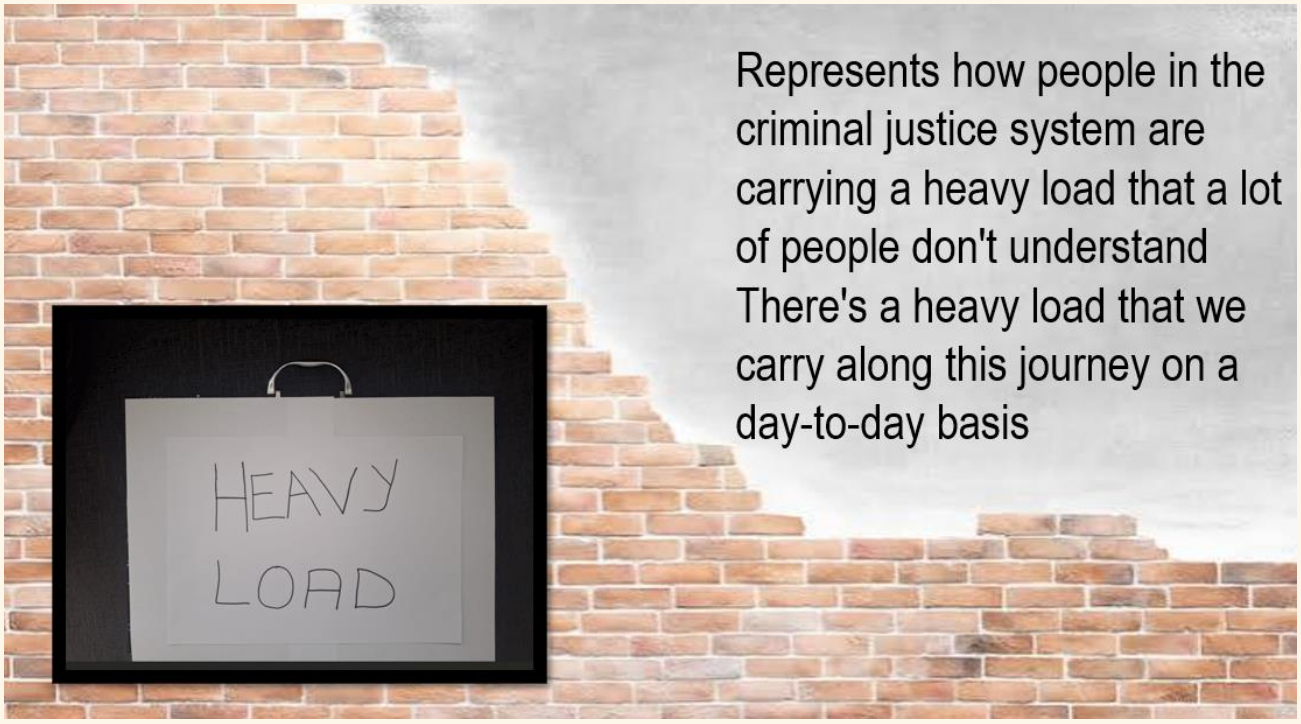
The system has had enough of me



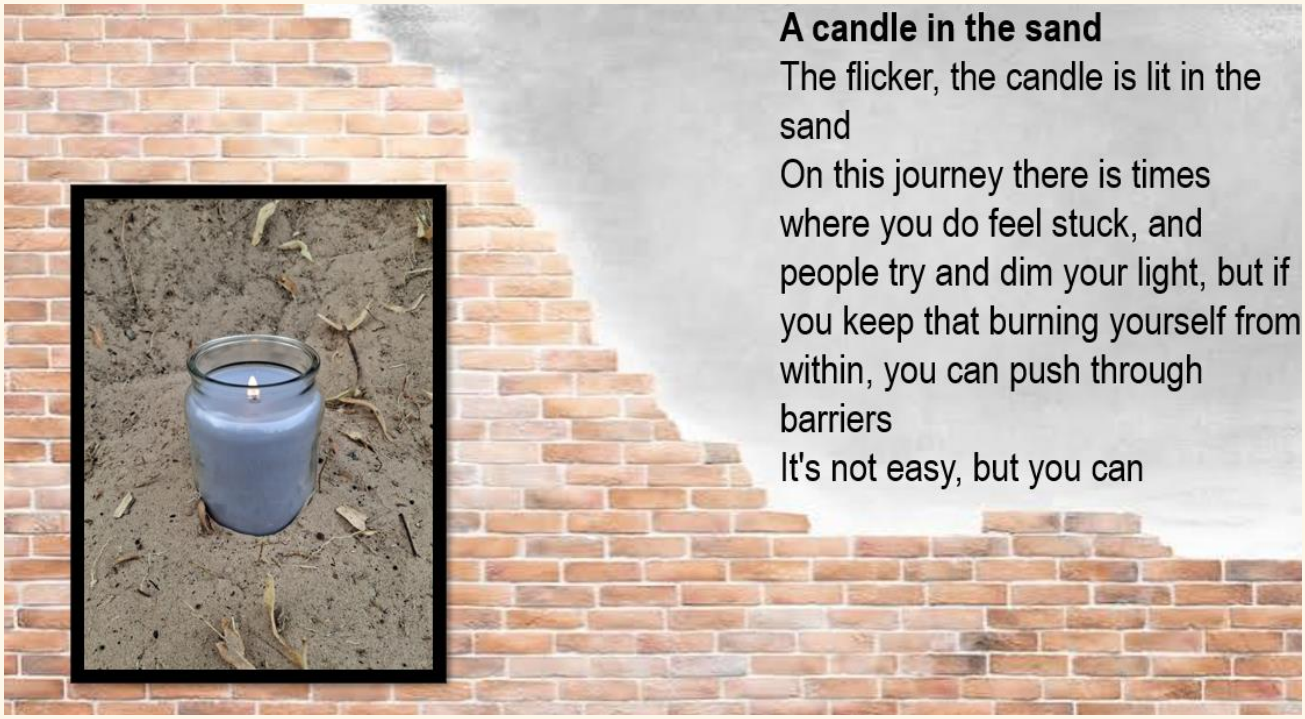
A collage using the magic of AI

It depicts me making the best of what the system's threw at me, what life has threw at me

Beyond release, I'm piecing myself all back together, but I'm a different version of me



Represents how people in the criminal justice system are carrying a heavy load that a lot of people don't understand
There's a heavy load that we carry along this journey on a day-to-day basis



A candle in the sand
The flicker, the candle is lit in the sand
On this journey there is times where you do feel stuck, and people try and dim your light, but if you keep that burning yourself from within, you can push through barriers
It's not easy, but you can



Statistics

Black to represent the colour kicking the statistics

Because me and [my sister] are a statistical miracle, we shouldn't be where we are today [running an organisation]

There's a lot of people that are black and female that haven't got two people on the journey



Freedom in creativity

Even though you're locked in a cage, your mind should be free to create

An individual, able to tailor your own path, the route that you learn about yourself, ownership to create

Something to be proud of, something to show a different side of yourself

Proof to yourself that you are not the same



Walking into the world
Something that I take great pleasure and therapy in
I find creativity in nature and I feel peace, I feel at one
There should be more avenues, especially for people that are from city life, to be given access to nature and the skills to be in nature



A microphone hanging and in the background there's some symbols
It's my hand holding on to the mic, symbolising that no matter what I should hold on to my creativity
The gift I've been given

POEM: The Silent Sparrow: A Presence Whose Voice Has Been Supressed

By Natasha Ryan & Kemi Ryan

Everyone sees the world from somewhere
Every story holds a perspective
Every experience carries a truth
Every voice has something to teach us
When we include the excluded
We don't weaken research we strengthen it

Research should not belong
Only to those with privilege
To those whose voices
Have always been welcomed
It should belong to everyone
Regardless of academic ability
Regardless of class
Regardless of colour
Regardless of the chapter written in our past

A criminal record can become a label
A shadow that follows
Turning opportunities into obstacles
And hope into something
We are told we no longer deserve

And in that space between
Who we were
And who we are becoming
There can be discrimination
Hopelessness
Despair
But when we listen beyond the classroom
Beyond the institution
Beyond the labels placed upon people
We begin to see a fuller picture
A picture shaped
By different lives
Different struggles
Different cultures
Different journeys
Research should reflect the people it seeks to understand
If we only study the birds that sing the loudest, we misunderstand the entire forest.



Research Messages

The song asks researchers to resist simple stories. Collaborators challenged us to look beyond labels, past convictions and individualised explanations of change. "Before you judge the story, ask what the system did too" is both a personal and a research message. Research should seek to understand the complexity of people's lives, the structural barriers they face, and the ways people actively work to break the chains that bind them. It should pay attention not only to disadvantage and harm, but also to agency, growth, healing and the labour involved in creating change.

The photographs make visible the barriers people continue to navigate long after a prison sentence has ended. They highlight the practical, emotional and institutional obstacles that shape everyday life, while also demonstrating the strategies people develop to re-learn who they want to be, move forward and process the mix of emotions that come with being human. Research should therefore focus on life after conviction, examining both the barriers that constrain opportunity and the resources, relationships and environments that support people to navigate them.

The poem broadens these messages by drawing attention to power, discrimination and whose knowledge counts. Collaborators reflected on how class, race, educational experiences and criminal records can shape not only people's opportunities, but also whether they are seen as credible contributors to research and public debate They also argued that research is strengthened when it draws on a diversity of social locations, cultures, perspectives and stages of life journey.

Together, creative and participatory approaches enabled people with extensive lived and practice expertise, but less formal research experience, to contribute to setting research priorities. These priorities called for research that is **shaped by lived experience, attentive to inequalities, barriers and possibilities and focused on life beyond conviction.** The work also highlights the importance of sharing research in ways that people can connect with emotionally and intellectually. Contributors wanted people to listen, to challenge stereotypes, improve public understanding and influence services. Future research should continue to use creative approaches not simply as methods of engagement, but as ways of generating, communicating and mobilising knowledge that is accessible, human and capable of driving change.