

Evaluating Perspectives of Stepwise Relationships

**Assessment of an Intervention for Low-Risk Service Users of Intimate Partner Violence
in Probation Service**

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Abstract

This research aims to analyse the perceptions of facilitators, service users and domestic abuse safety officers (DASO) of “Stepwise Relationships”, a structured intervention for women and men with prior convictions of intimate partner violence in opposite- or same-sex relationships. Semi-structured interviews with $n = 7$ service users, $n = 5$ facilitators, and $n = 5$ DASOs were used to conduct a thematic analysis to identify strengths and weaknesses of the Stepwise Relationships programme and ensure that the programme could be more closely tailored to the probation service and further testing. Service users reported an improvement in their social and communication skills through in-person group delivery. Facilitators reported that the Stepwise Relationships intervention allows them to deliver complex, relationship-related topics in a short period of time, but could not respond flexibly to specific issues that service users experience due to the structure of the sessions. For the corresponding victims’ service, DASOs questioned whether the length of the programme matched the needs of the service users’ current or former partner. The analysis also revealed that the specific conditions of the delivery, either in-person or remotely via phone, had a significant impact on service users’ perception of the intervention. Overall, however, service users, facilitators and DASOS found the Stepwise Relationships intervention to be a useful addition to other accredited programmes in the probation service and considered the intervention to be appropriate for further testing.

Keywords: intimate partner violence, intervention, low-risk service users, domestic abuse safety service, probation service

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is one of the most underrecognized relationship-related problems in societies, with serious consequences and costs for individuals, families, and communities (Arias & Corso, 2005; Stewart et al., 2012). IPV occurs between spouses or other intimate partners and comprises various domains of violent behaviour that work in favour of the partner who exerts power regarding sexual decision making, socioeconomic status, level of status, disabilities, and race (Brown, 2008; Eaton et al., 2008; Finneran & Stephenson, 2013; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Abuse occurs in a cyclic fashion and intensifies over time through control and social isolation (Burke & Follingstad, 1999; Elliot, 1996; Hamberger et al., 2017).

The cyclic dynamic of abuse can be found in all kinds of intimate relationships, irrespective of gender and sexual preferences. Research has shown that the frequency of IPV in LGBTQ relationships might occur on a higher, but at least similar, rate compared to IPV in heterosexual relationships (Brown, 2008; Eaton et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2012). These findings show that IPV is not only a consequence of men wishing to exert dominance over women. In 2004 the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act (United Kingdom) included same-sex couples in Part 1, Section 3, and the act states that people who suffer from IPV in same-sex relationships should be able to get the same kind of help as heterosexual victims.

IPV is a common experience; moreover, when experienced it can be extremely damaging for people. Psychological health consequences for the partner subjected to IPV may include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), drug abuse and suicide attempts (Black, 2011; Golding, 1999; Kimmes et al., 2019; McCaw et al., 2007; Parker, 2015; Stewart et al., 2012), and it can also result in physical injuries like trauma, chronic pain or migraine headaches (Black, 2011; Golding, 1996; McCaw et al., 2007; Stewart et al., 2012; World Health Organization, 2021).

To reduce recidivism and prevent reoffending, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) uses interventions to work with people convicted of IPV. The referral to attend an intervention is part of the condition of probation and therefore mandatory. The interventions should help service users to gain insight into their behaviour and improve coping skills through a personal working relationship with a facilitator (Burnett et al., 2007; Krug et al., 2002; Lussier et al., 2011; Stewart et al., 2012).

Regarding the effectiveness of IPV-related interventions, research has suggested that intensive treatment yields greater benefits for high-risk service users than their low-risk counterparts (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). One study even showed that there was no significant benefit at all for low-risk service users attending treatment (Friendship et al., 2003). This indicates that high-risk service users might benefit more from treatment than other service users and should be prioritised (Wakeling et al., 2012). However, low-risk service users still pose a risk to the public, and not addressing their needs in interventions can increase the likelihood of them committing a more serious crime in the future (Wakeling et al., 2012). Preventive interventions can help low-risk service users to return to their supportive environment and reinforce the individual skills and external factors that lead them away from offending (Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2004).

To work with low-risk service users with IPV convictions, HMPPS developed a programme called Stepwise Relationships that addresses IPV in opposite-sex as well as same-sex relationships (Her Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, 2022). The programme is suitable for male, female and transsexual service users, and provides facilitators with a manual that can be adjusted according to the gender of the perpetrator and the victim. Stepwise Relationships can be delivered to four target groups: male and female service users in same-sex or opposite sex relationships. Bisexual and transsexual service users can choose the target group most relevant to their circumstances. Additionally, the manual advises practitioners to match facilitators with service users that share the same demographic

characteristics (e.g., sex, ethnicity, or sexual orientation) (Her Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, 2022).

This research evaluated Stepwise Relationships from the perspective of programme facilitators, which administer the programme, service users, for whom the intervention is designed, and domestic abuse safety officers (DASOs), who work with the current or ex-partners of service user. Stepwise Relationships is a new intervention that has replaced Spectrum, the previous IPV programme (for more information, see Niggemeier, 2022), and therefore needs evaluation before a larger rollout. An initial assessment of any new intervention is important to detect weaknesses and to identify and minimize potential harm – be it to service users, facilitators or DASOs. This study used facilitators and service users' perspectives to evaluate the intervention itself and to identify barriers as well as catalysts to establishing good working relationships within groups. DASOs views were needed to capture issues with the programme that might impact the potential (or actual) victims who DASOs represent. The following section provides an overview of the structure of the Stepwise Relationships intervention and its theoretical basis.

The Stepwise Relationships Intervention

Stepwise Relationships is a structured intervention of HMPPS. It aims to support desistance in people who have exhibited IPV, helps them to set more positive life goals for themselves, and assists them in dealing with situations in a way that will lead them away from reoffending (Her Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, 2022). The intervention is designed to build on the pre-existing strengths of the service users, providing them with an image of what future relationships can look like and thus equipping them with skills for a better future. The Stepwise Relationships programme is a new intervention, within the probation service with similarities to Building Better Relationships (BBR). Indeed, as the following shows, Stepwise Relationships developed from this earlier IPV programme.

Building Better Relationships (BBR)

Building Better Relationships (BBR) is a moderate-intensity, cognitive-behavioural programme for adult men convicted of IPV who have been assessed as medium or high-risk on the *Spousal Assault Risk Assessment* (SARA) (HMIP, 2018; Ministry of Justice, 2022). The SARA, developed by Kropp and colleagues, is a structured professional judgment scheme that evaluates the level of risk posed by IPV offenders (Kropp et al. 1999, as cited in Shapiro & Noe, 2015). The SARA guide evaluates the criminal history of an offender, the current mental stability and background, any history of spousal assault, and current or most recent offences to determine if an offender show a low, medium, or high risk (Kropp & Gibas, 2021). The risk evaluation can be used to schedule suitable interventions for the service user and manage the case according to the risk level (Shapiro & Noe, 2015; Viglione et al., 2015).

BBR was introduced into the probation service in 2012 and fully replaced the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP) in 2015 (HMIP, 2018). The BBR programme aims to increase service users' understanding of their offence, improve their relationship skills, and reduce risk factors by addressing aggression as a complex problem with multiple causes (HMIP, 2018; Ministry of Justice, 2022). BBR accommodates the roles of different learning styles, personal and situational factors, substance misuse, and the emotions and thoughts of individual service users (Hughes, 2017).

The programme is characterized by a desistance-focused, strengths-based approach, emphasizing the importance of a therapeutic alliance between the facilitator and the service user and promoting therapeutic techniques to emotional management (Renehan, 2021). It consists of four core modules, each consisting of six sessions: one core module covers the programme concepts, while the other three modules focus on thinking patterns, emotions and relationships (Hughes, 2019; Renehan, 2021). BBR gives attention to pathways that lead away from offending and is less confrontational in its design than the IDAP was. The BBR programme helps service users to explore different lives and identities and focuses less on

past abuse, violence, and the service user's identity as a perpetrator (Hughes, 2019). This same, less confrontational approach is used for the Stepwise Relationships intervention.

Description of the Stepwise Relationships Intervention

The Stepwise Relationships intervention is a new programme within HMPPS and as of the beginning of September 2022 had only been implemented in a few regions in England and Wales. England and Wales consist of 12 probation regions with different probation delivery units. These regional boundaries correspond with the police force and local authority areas (Her Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, 2021). Stepwise Relationships is a combination of accredited programme content, e.g., Building Better Relationships (BBR) and content from legacy domestic abuse interventions. The four core modules, entitled 'foundation', 'thinking', 'emotions' and 'relationships' are similar to BBR, but in Stepwise Relationships, each module consists of only two to three sessions instead of six (Her Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, 2022).

Stepwise Relationships is designed to work with low-risk service users. Medium- and high-risk service users are supposed to be referred to a more established, accredited programme like BBR instead. Stepwise Relationships is less intense than an accredited programme like BBR because low-risk service users have a lower deviancy compared to high-risk service users, which supports the concept that low-risk service users need less treatment (Wakeling et al., 2012). For medium- or high-risk service users, the intensity of Stepwise Relationships might not be enough to promote desistance (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). The scope of Stepwise Relationships is in line with the needs of low-risk service users and is designed to reduce recidivism for this target group.

The Stepwise Relationships programme includes 40 exercises delivered across 10 sessions. Each session should last 90 minutes. The first session is a pre-intervention module that needs to be completed by the service user before taking part in the following sessions. Facilitators complete a domestic abuse safety officer (DASO) referral with the service user.

The DASO service is a specialist service for current or ex-partners of service users that provides these partners with emotional support and information, and is a component of other accredited domestic abuse programmes (Woolford & McCarthy, 2022). The victim service contributes to men and women's safety, and uses risk assessments and safety planning to identify risks. Except for the service users' first pre-session with the facilitator, which is delivered on a one-to-one basis, all other Stepwise Relationship sessions take place in a group setting with a maximum of eight service users and two facilitators. A one-to-one delivery format of the whole programme is only an alternative for service users who are unable to participate in a group content due to their diversity needs (Her Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, 2022).

The theoretical basis of Stepwise Relationships. Stepwise Relationships is based on the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model by Andrews and Bonta (2007). The model consists of three core principles: the risk principle, the need principle, and the responsivity principle. The risk principle reflects the idea of matching the service users' risk of reoffending with the level of service. The need principle focuses on assessing and targeting 'criminogenic needs' to decrease the likelihood of recidivism (Andrews et al., 1990). 'Criminogenic needs', sometimes referred to as 'dynamic risk factors', are individual characteristics that are directly linked to the criminal activity of a person (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

The last principle of the three is the responsivity principle; Stepwise Relationships particularly focuses on this principle, which asserts that treatment interventions should be tailored to the individual personality characteristics of service users, like motivation, abilities, and strengths (Andrews et al., 2011; Bonta & Wormith, 2013; Bonta & Andrews, 2007). Biological, psychological, and social factors play an important role in the responsivity principle, particularly with respect to a given service user's learning history (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Morris et al., 2022). For example, Dutton's 'Nested Ecological Model' (NEM) (1995) explains IPV as the result of biopsychosocial influences and interactions. The

individual characteristics of a person interact with his or her social environment and the community and society her or she lives in. According to the NEM, the social context shapes personal characteristics and facilitates (or hinders) behaviours and attitudes that promote offending (Dutton, 1995). The Stepwise Relationships intervention integrates this theoretical approach, taking the individual characteristics and the social environment of service users into account in an effort to influence the therapeutic process (Andrews et al., 2011; Leitch, 2017; Morris et al., 2022). This means that each exercise can be adjusted according to the intellectual ability and motivation level of the service user. Additionally, the programme focuses on family relationships and the influence of peers and work to increase desistance (Andrews et al., 2011; Morris et al., 2022).

Stepwise Relationships uses a group setting to enhance service users' engagement in goals and tasks. Similar experiences in the group are intended to create mutual understanding and help service users to reflect on their behaviour as well as to support and challenge each other (Beech & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Frost & Connolly, 2004; Morgan et al., 1999). The group setting promotes the development of skills and attitudes that are necessary to build up and maintain positive relationships and prosocial networks. Additionally, the group can strengthen the belief in personal change (Carter & Mann, 2016; Ross et al., 2008). Stepwise Relationships motivates service users to learn new skills through perspective-taking and coping skills (Fernandez, 1999, as cited in Beech & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005). Active behaviour adaptation results in individually directed as well as social reinforcement for change, improved interpersonal communication and possible increased resilience among service users (Leitch, 2017; Prochaska & Diclemente, 1983; Roback, 2000). The group setting should increase service users' opportunities to take more responsibility for personal goals and task completion through positive feedback (Morris et al., 2022). Encouragement from the facilitator, the group and the social environment can help service users to actively apply their

new knowledge and behaviour skills to influence and de-escalate situations that would normally lead to offending.

The exercises in Stepwise Relationships are designed to help service users to understand their behaviour, motivate them to think about and reflect on their views of themselves and others, commit to self-responsibility and develop skills to aid their social competence and maturity. Service users should have the possibility to discuss their pre-existing strengths, like successful problem solving or stress management, with the group to further strengthen this behaviour (Her Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, 2022).

Another component of the programme includes 35 animated video clips that correspond to the content of the manual. The digital media clips and the exercises are designed to make the programme more appealing to service users by using real stories and voices of former service users (Morris, 2021; Morris & Knight, 2018). The clips introduce separate skills and concepts to the service users and are designed to promote conversation, which is of developing a less confrontational approach (Her Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, 2022; Hughes, 2019; Morris et al., 2022). Bandura's social cognitive theory (1992) states that seeing another person with whom the observer can identify influences the observer's judgement regarding a task's difficulty. For this reason, video clips can positively influence self-efficacy and promote desistance (Bandura, 1992; Morris & Knight, 2018), because service users have the possibility to discuss the situations from the videos with their group members and elaborate on different behaviour techniques that would direct them away from (re)offending. This in turn should help service users to integrate these new skills into their behaviour repertoire. Visual cues in the video clips are used to signal the emotional states of the characters, to help service users reflect on their own emotional experiences (Morris et al., 2022). In 2021, Morris and colleagues evaluated the use of digital media clips for the Skills for Relationships Toolkit (SRT) and concluded that the clips had been effective in achieving these aims in a similar intervention.

Domestic abuse safety officers (DASOs)

The DASO service is a specialist service for women and men subjected to or at risk of experiencing IPV, and is a mandatory component of accredited domestic abuse programmes (Woolford & McCarthy, 2022). The service is important for Stepwise Relationships because it provides aid to any current or ex-partner of a person participating in a domestic abuse intervention (Her Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, 2022). Current partners could be primary victims or people at risk, while ex-partners are the primary victims, who have special needs. The (former) partners needs may range from information that the DASOs provide, to emotional support, to safety for the partners of the service users (Madoc-Jones & Roscoe, 2010). Madoc-Jones and Roscoe (2010) stated that this support builds trust, which in turn allows DASOs to address any ongoing issues of abuse, and provide women and men with the knowledge and tools to keep them safe in the future.

DASOs typically work on a case for twelve to twenty-four months. The length depends on the individual needs of the current or ex-partner (Woolford & McCarthy, 2022). The meetings are generally face-to-face and in a safe place (Mawby, 2016). DASOs aim to create an intimate atmosphere to help the person at risk open up and understand the processes that the IPV-related intervention is supposed to promote in their partners. This service can be used for effective case management, as the partner subjected to IPV has the possibility to identify potential red flags or sensitive issues of the partner convicted of IPV. Being actively engaged in the therapeutic process can also be helpful for the actual victim of IPV to come to terms with the abuse and violence (Spalek, 2003, as cited in Woolford & McCarthy, 2022).

The referral to the DASO service for Stepwise Relationships can be the first connection to an aid service for the women and men subjected to or at risk of experiencing IPV. Therefore, any evaluation of Stepwise Relationships needs to incorporate DASOs' views; these officers provide unique insights about the programme from a victims' side. It is necessary to evaluate how Stepwise Relationships influences the current or ex-partners of a

service user, and if the way the DASO service is integrated into the programme re-exposes this already-vulnerable group of people to risk. Therefore, it is worthwhile to analyse the influence of Stepwise Relationships on the quality of the DASO service, and modify Stepwise Relationships if necessary.

Current study

This preliminary study uses semi-structured interviews to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Stepwise Relationships intervention from the perspective of the service users, facilitators and DASOs. The study incorporates thematic analysis by Clarke and Braun (2006, 2021) to analyse potential barriers and dangers that interviewees experienced while delivering and attending the Stepwise Relationships intervention or working with those whose (former) partners took part in the programme. The main aim was to understand how service users experience the programme and if service users observed any impact on their social or cognitive skills due to their participation in Stepwise Relationships. Facilitators' perceptions of the programme were analysed to examine how the programme is delivered and if it needs to be adjusted to better fit the needs of service users and facilitators. The DASOs were asked to evaluate the influences that Stepwise Relationships had on their victim service. This is necessary to be able to understand if the conditions of the DASO service and the Stepwise Relationships programme harmonize, or if obstacles arise that might reduce the quality of the victim service for the DASO clients of Stepwise Relationships. These considerations led to the following three questions:

1. How do facilitators and service users experience the in-person delivery of Stepwise Relationships in terms of the influence on the group dynamics, previous training sessions and the practicability of the manual?
2. How do service users perceive the Stepwise Relationships programme?
3. What are the risks and benefits of the Stepwise Relationships programme for the DASO service?

Method

Semi-structured interviews

Participants

Facilitators. Facilitators were selected randomly from a list of regions across the probation service that had delivered Stepwise Relationships. It was important that facilitators had provided at least one whole run of the programme. The fact that not many Stepwise Relationships interventions had been delivered created a small throughput and therefore a smaller sample. Of the five facilitators interviewed, three were female and two were male, with ages between 18 and 49. Facilitators had worked in probation for a mean of 5.2 years ($SD = 6.6$) and had been facilitators for a mean of 4.2 years ($SD = 4.9$). All had previously delivered BBR, and three facilitators had also delivered other structured interventions focused on domestic abuse. The mean length of the facilitator interviews was 30:19 minutes, and ranged from 25:02 minutes to 44:41 minutes, plus five to ten minutes for introductions and debriefings.

Service users. Probation officers were informed about the study and selected service users from their database who had attended at least 70% of the Stepwise Relationships intervention and were willing to take part in the study. Service users were contacted via phone to schedule the interviews. All service users had completed 100% of Stepwise Relationships. One service user experienced remote delivery of Stepwise Relationships, while the other six attended in-person group meetings. All service users were male, with an age range from 21 to 62 years ($M = 34.29$, $SD = 13.41$), heterosexual, white and British, except for one participant who differed in nationality and ethnicity. Four service users in the sample had children. Of all service users that were interviewed, only two were in a new relationship; the others were single. The mean length of the interviews was 21:33 minutes, with 12:06 minutes minimum and 26:26 minutes maximum, with additional time for introductions and debriefings.

DASOs. The DASOs were sampled from regions who were currently running Stepwise Relationships. This was purposive sampling; it was necessary to recruit DASOs who had some knowledge of the intervention, which meant that they should have been included in Stepwise Relationships training. This way, it was possible to ensure that DASOs had the possibility of working with a current or ex-partner of a service user, or at least had a view on how they would work with these partners. In the sample, two DASOs had only a theoretical understanding of Stepwise Relationships because they either had no person whose partner had attended the Stepwise Relationships intervention, or the programme had not started in their region by the time they were interviewed. All five DASOs interviewed were women between the ages of 30 and 69. All had worked in probation before, for a mean of 14.2 years ($SD = 6.46$), had been a DASO for 3 to 7 years ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 1.67$) and had provided the DASO service for BBR clients. The DASO interviews had a mean length of 33:14 minutes, with a range from 27:07 minutes to 52:50 minutes, with an additional five to ten minutes for introductions and debriefings.

Topic guides

All three topic guides were created by mapping out Stepwise Relationships for the process evaluation according to the objectives of the research question. Three topic guides were specifically developed to examine the respective perceptions of facilitators, service users, and DASOs of the Stepwise Relationships structured intervention. The guide differed for each of the three groups because the research question focuses on different aspects of the programme for each sample.

Facilitators. The facilitator topic guide (Appendix A) examines facilitators' experiences with the Stepwise Relationship training to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the current training regimen. Facilitators were asked to evaluate their perception of the delivery of Stepwise Relationships and if they felt that Stepwise Relationships is based on a strengths-based approach. The topic guide explored facilitators'

perceptions of the digital media clips and the content itself to gain an understanding of how facilitators perceived service users' engagement with the material. Further, the topic guide tries to explore facilitators' ongoing professional development through Stepwise Relationships.

Service users. The service user topic guide (Appendix B) was created to explore the experiences and perceptions of service users taking part in Stepwise Relationships. The topic guide explored service users' expectations to gain an understanding of some of the catalysts and barriers to participating in the programme. This analysis examines service users' impressions of the content and the media clips to see how well service users could identify with it and what they learned from the clips. Additionally, the topic guide examines service users' perceptions of and experiences with the facilitators that delivered Stepwise Relationships. Service users were asked to reflect on the real-life application of the skills they had learned during the sessions to explore if Stepwise Relationships has a lasting cognitive effect from the service users' perspective.

DASOs. The DASO topic guide (Appendix C) explored the DASOs' role in the probation service and their key responsibilities. Furthermore, the topic guide attempted to capture DASOs' perceptions of the training for Stepwise Relationships, and any strengths and weaknesses in the programme that DASOs could identify. The analysis also evaluated DASOs' way of working their clients in general and how they perceived Stepwise Relationships from a victim-service perspective.

Procedure

Before the start of the interviews, this study obtained ethical approval from the National Research Committee (NRC Reference: 2022-067) in the UK and the BMS faculty ethics committee at the University of Twente in the Netherlands (reference number: 221135). After the first contact with the interviewees through e-mail and phone messages, Dr. Rebecca Woolford (HMPPS) scheduled individual appointments for the facilitators, DASOs and

service users. Dr. Woolford is a research and evaluation manager in the probation reform programme at HMPPS. She is the connection between HMPPS and the University of Twente and was responsible for contact with the facilitators, DASOs and service users, and developed the verbal consent and the interview guide for all three samples. Dr. Woolford and I discussed the interview guide before interviewing each sample, and adjusted the guides by restructuring, deleting, or adding questions if necessary. The topic guides are flexible and could be adjusted during the interview. All researchers taking part in the study had the possibility to change the order of the questions to increase the smoothness of the interview or skip questions if they had already been answered by the interviewee.

All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams from the beginning of September 2022 until the end of October 2022 due to the international collaboration of the researchers, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the security of the researchers and the interviewees. The interviews were co-moderated by Dr. Woolford and me, and interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the service users, facilitators and DASOs. I conducted one DASO interview on my own due to an overlap in Dr. Woolford's schedule. Dr. Woolford had to be present during the service user interviews to safeguard the service users themselves and the researchers. She had access to the service user's probation referral and knew if the service user had a disability or a mental health problem that we needed to consider. Additionally, Dr. Woolford informed me if the service user had a prior conviction of stalking, which meant that we had to reduce the amount of personal information that we shared with the service user to a minimum. Neither of us as interviewers were involved with the development of Stepwise Relationships. Being involved in the development of the programme might lead to a biased development of interview topic guides, influence the data analysis, and affect the way the results are interpreted.

The interviews started with a brief introduction where the interviewers introduced themselves and the study. Interviewees were informed that they could withdraw at any point

from the interview and that their data would be securely stored, and identifiable information would be kept confidential and deleted once anonymized transcripts were available and the data analysis was completed. We asked the interviewees for verbal consent (Appendix D for all three verbal consents) and if they agreed to be recorded. If they disagreed, there was a protocol for not consenting to audio recording. In this case, Dr. Woolford led the interview, and I took notes and remained silent. This was explained to the service user to avoid irritation. One service user did not give consent to being recorded.

The main interviews were conducted based on the topic guide for each interview group (Appendix A-C). The guide outlined the possibility of asking additional questions for clarification or restructuring the interview to follow up on service users' comments of interest that addressed the research questions. Allowing this flexibility in the structure can prevent distraction on the part of both the interviewer and the interviewee, and can increase the smoothness of the interview. Additionally, semi-structured topic guides provide interviewers with the possibility to ask for elaboration on a question. The interviewer indicated when the audio recording stopped. After that, the interviewees were asked if they would like to receive a summary of the main findings in February 2023 and a debriefing followed.

After all interviews had been conducted, they were transcribed using the software *Amberscript*. *Amberscript* is coding software that transcribes spoken text, while storing it in a highly secured cloud environment, which is in line with the ethical practices regarding this type of research. I reviewed all transcriptions to see if everything was correctly reproduced and if the software correctly indicated interviewers and interviewees. Sensitive context, names or specific locations that would breach the confidentiality and anonymity consent with the interviewees are indicated by [sensitive content]. The program *NVIVO* was used for the data analysis.

Data evaluation and thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis is one qualitative data analysis (QDA) method that offers the advantage of great flexibility. It helps researchers recognize and identify, analyse, and report patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and can be used to analyse data from traditional face-to-face interviews (Terry et al., 2017). The main aim of thematic analysis is to identify key features of the data that answer the research question and provide a deeper insight into understanding what interviewees think, feel, and do (Terry et al., 2017).

Thematic analysis allows interviewers and researchers to determine themes in two different ways: inductively and deductively (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Inductive coding derives themes from the data without trying to fit them into pre-existing concepts or beliefs. This means that a description of the themes is needed to justify them. Deductive coding, in contrast, is a theory-driven approach. It uses preliminary themes or theories, and therefore the description of the data focuses on justifying deviations from the initial theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the analysis of Stepwise Relationships, I used both inductive and deductive coding to identify themes in the dataset. Deductive coding was used because of the existing literature about the perceptions and experiences of facilitators and service users with IPV-related interventions in the probation service, and descriptions about the DASO service and its advantages and disadvantages for accredited domestic abuse programmes. Inductive coding was necessary to combine these pre-existing themes into thematic blocks to answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Another distinction needs to be made in terms of semantic and latent codes. Semantic codes look at the data itself and capture explicit meaning (Terry et al., 2017). These codes organize and summarize the observations made by the participants in the study, making it possible to interpret and theorize the most important aspects afterwards. Latent codes are broader than semantic codes because they capture implicit meanings in the data and identify

underlying ideas, concepts, or assumptions. Latent codes are usually used to “shape” semantic codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Terry et al., 2017). For Stepwise Relationships, it made more sense to use the semantic level of analysis, because the codes needed to capture the meaning of what participants said. The answers of service users, facilitators and DASOs were coded to identify commonalities or differences in the way the interviewees experienced the Stepwise Relationships intervention. The codes were designed to represent and reflect the interviewees’ answers and perspectives, since these are critical for understanding how Stepwise Relationships works in practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The theoretical basis for the deductive approach incorporated the articles “Towards a desistance-focused approach to probation supervision for people who have committed Intimate Partner Violence: A digital toolkit pilot study” written by Morris et al. (2021), “The partner link worker: A vital but undervalued service for women who have been subjected to or at risk of domestic abuse” written by Woolford and McCarthy (2022) and a master thesis, “Evaluating Spectrum – Assessment of an Intervention for Offenders of Intimate Partner Violence” written by Leona-Jopie Niggemeier (2002). Morris et al. (2021) analysed practitioners and service users’ reflections on a digitally enabled toolkit for men with convictions for IPV called the Skills for Relationships Toolkit (SRT). The codes *Working alliance*, *Flexibility*, *Time management*, and *Training needs* were used as a start for the facilitator data. *Impact on relationship with case managers*, *Identification with content*, *Increased insight*, and *Increased empathy* were used to code the service users’ answers for Stepwise Relationships.

For the data of the DASOs, Woolford and McCarthy’s (2022) study provided the initial themes. In their study, the researchers evaluated the partner link worker (PLW) service within the probation system. Their analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the PLW service and their perspective on the PLW’s future role within the probation service provided a starting point to evaluate the DASO data here.

Niggemeier's (2022) study served as the departure point for the evaluation of the remote delivery case study for Stepwise Relationships. She evaluated Spectrum (the direct precursor for Stepwise Relationships) during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted the new possibilities and the new difficulties of remote delivery from the facilitators' perspectives (Niggemeier, 2022). The codes *Participant engagement* and *Learning skills* were used as a starting point for the remote-delivery service-user data. The themes presented in Table 1 indicate if they were used to code data regarding the service user, the facilitator, or the DASO. This classification was based on prior literature.

Table 1

Overview of the initial codes and themes to analyse the Stepwise Relationships intervention

Thematic block	Theme
Impact on facilitator relationship with service users	Therapeutic alliance (facilitator theme)
	Therapeutic alliance (service user theme)
Impact on service user	Participant engagement (facilitator theme)
	Training needs (facilitator theme)
	Delivery of Stepwise Relationships (service user theme)
	Accessibility (service user theme)
	Identification with content (service user theme)
	Increased insight and empathy (service user theme)
Impact on probation service	Real life application (service user theme)
	Collaboration with facilitator (DASO theme)

Training needs (DASO theme)

Impact of DA structured intervention on
victim (DASO theme)

Influence on DASO service (DASO theme)

Initially, I developed separate themes for service users, facilitators, and DASOs. However, this resulted in an accumulation of themes with a similar name or a similar meaning that described the same experience, but only from a different point of view. As a result, in the end it made more sense to combine themes with a similar name or meaning. The new themes focused only on the interviewees' perceptions of Stepwise Relationships, and did not differentiate among facilitator, service user, or DASO data (Terry et al., 2017). The themes were then combined into thematic blocks when they described aspects of the same overarching concept; as Kuckartz (2019) put it, a thematic block combines themes into a specific category or argument. For this analysis, the research questions guided the defining of the thematic blocks. When data relevant for the research questions did not fit into the existing themes, it required adding new themes, or modifying the thematic block and the themes within the block to be able to incorporate the data. Data not relevant for the study was not coded.

Originally, in the first framework, the statements regarding the experiences of remote delivery were included in the codes for the service users who experienced in-person delivery. During the analysis, it became clear that the service user who attended Stepwise Relationships remotely had an idiosyncratic experience, and this could not be combined with the statements that described in-person delivery experiences. After the modification, it was necessary to exclude the remote delivery statements from the themes that focused on in-person delivery, and instead form a case study that evaluated remote delivery experiences. This resulted in an additional research question:

4. What does remote delivery of the programme look like for operational practice (a case study approach)?

Results

Inductive and deductive coding led to the development of four thematic blocks as can be seen in Table 2. The responses of all interview groups were combined into a single framework to be able to compare responses from the different samples and draw overarching conclusions. The themes in the thematic block *Delivery of Stepwise Relationships* have been used to code facilitators' and service users' data. The initial framework was modified by combining the themes *Working alliance* and *Impact on relationship with case managers* into *Camaraderie and group dynamics*. This theme focuses on the power of group delivery to facilitate a therapeutic alliance among service users as well as facilitators in the group setting. *Time management* and *Flexibility* were combined into *Flexibility*, because then the theme could cover the influence of time management in Stepwise Relationships with respect to being flexible within the intervention. *Participant engagement* was modified into *Engagement with content* to highlight the fact that this theme focused on the individual service user's engagement with the content and the material, and not with the intervention itself.

The themes *Increased insight* and *Increased empathy* were combined into the thematic block *Impact on service users*, as the block covers all aspects of cognitive influence that service users reported. This thematic block was used only for service user data.

The advantages and disadvantages of the PLW service and the future role of the PLW in the probation service were combined into *Impact on the DASO service*. This thematic block focused on the influence of Stepwise Relationships on the DASO service, capturing advantages and disadvantages of the intervention on the victim service and providing DASOs' perspectives about the future of the DASO service for Stepwise Relationships. It also includes *Training needs*.

The remote-delivery case study was excluded from the other thematic blocks to make

it possible to analyse the remote experiences of Stepwise Relationships separately from in-person delivery. The fact that remote delivery is only recommended for exceptional cases provided the reason for an independent analysis. The theme *Participant engagement* was integrated into the case-study theme *Service users' perceptions of remote delivery*. This theme focuses on the engagement of the service user with the content in a remote environment, and covers additional aspects such as *Working alliance* and *Impact on relationship with case managers* from a remote perspective. The subtheme *Learning skills* was deleted for the case study; in contrast *Factors that influence the engagement with Stepwise Relationships* emerged as a new theme, making it possible to analyse the influence of individual characteristics and external circumstances on remote delivery.

Table 2

Overview of thematic blocks and corresponding themes for Stepwise Relationships

Thematic block	Theme
Delivery of Stepwise Relationships	Camaraderie and group dynamics
	Flexibility
	Training needs
	Engagement with content
Impact on service users	
Impact on the DASO service	
Experiences of remote delivery via phone (a case study)	Service users' perceptions of remote delivery
	Factors that influence the engagement with Stepwise Relationships

Delivery of Stepwise Relationships

This thematic block focuses on the implementation of the Stepwise Relationships

intervention in practice from the perspectives of the service users and facilitators.

Camaraderie and group dynamics captured the influence of group delivery on the working relationship between facilitator and service users. Additionally, the theme covers aspects of the service users' perceptions of the dynamics in the group sessions. *Flexibility* focuses on the facilitators possibilities to change the Stepwise Relationship intervention according to the service users' needs. Comments about time management and the experiences of in-person delivery specifically were included in this theme. *Training needs* captures facilitators' requests for additional support and training, shedding light on how Stepwise Relationships was introduced to them, how they were taught to carry it out, and what additional training needs they could identify after their training. *Engagement with content* focuses on service users' perceptions of the content of Stepwise Relationships to see if the service users could relate to it, or if it needs to be adjusted to meet individual needs.

Camaraderie and group dynamics

This theme identifies how the Stepwise Relationships intervention allows facilitators to create a therapeutic alliance with service users, and whether the intervention promotes a non-judgemental and respectful group atmosphere. Facilitators 1, 3, and 5 indicated that the strengths-based approach of Stepwise Relationships facilitated positive engagement between facilitators, service users, and their peers. Furthermore, Facilitator 1 and service users 6 and 7 highlighted the fact that the strengths-based approach increased service users' self-confidence and resilience. The fact that facilitators have the possibility to meet each service user in a one-to-one session before the start of the group sessions gives them the opportunity to prepare service users for the course, and keeps them safe by discussing issues like work ties, family commitments, or anxieties. Facilitator 5 highlighted the fact that she establishes ground rules and guidelines for engagement which not only might reduce anxiety but also prepares service users for what will be discussed during the sessions.

Usually in the one to ones [I] will say that we're never going to ask someone to reveal their offense. If they wish to talk about it, that's on their terms. But if it was something like along the lines of rape or something like that, we will mention (...) that there is a session on consent and keeping that conversation comfortable and (...) safe (...) because no matter how comfortable they get in a group room, mentioning that that's what they're there for can massively change the dynamic.

Facilitator 5 suggested that facilitators inform the service users in the preliminary meeting that certain offense-related subjects might come up during the length of the Stepwise Relationships intervention. To increase facilitators' sensitivity to these aspects during the sessions, Facilitator 5 recommended that it might be useful to advise service users to discuss offences like rape with their facilitators.

Service users 6 and 7 said that the willingness of each group member to talk about his experiences created a shared understanding in the group. The service users indicated that they relied on each other for help and support during and after the sessions. Mirroring earlier reflections from service users, Facilitators 3 and 5 observed that their service users became more open over the course of the programme and that they actively used the skills they learned during the previous sessions to challenge and comfort each other. Some service users suggested that the fact that the group members shared similar experiences tempered some of the more critical questions and resulted in a friendly, intimate group atmosphere because no one felt judged. Service user 6 described an example where he and another member were able to talk with a peer on a different level than the others, and thus create a deeper understanding for the subject that they had been discussing in a group session.

And he kind of sat there, kind of holding everything against himself, instead of saying, 'alright, this is what I'm at fault for, and this is what she's fault for'. (...) He wasn't taking in what the people were actually saying, until there was me and another gentleman. We both sat there. We told him, like, this is how you have to do it.

Service user 2 reflected that this experience could help other group members to open up and internalize learned strategies more deeply. They can rely on the group for support and assistance at precisely the point when they are struggling with the content of the intervention.

One negative aspect of the group delivery was that facilitators experienced difficulties when they had to deal with a crisis of a service user during the group sessions. Facilitator 3 and 4 described a change in the group dynamics due to the crisis. Additionally, Facilitator 3 criticized the fact that facilitators felt that they had to make a distinction between delivering the sessions and helping the individual service users.

If I'm honest, we had an issue last week where someone was going through a tough time (...) and we probably spent 30, 40 minutes dealing with him throughout the whole session, because he was not in the right place to be doing that. And we still had two others, like, pretty much sat in the room, like, 'what's going on?' We tried to deliver as best we can.

This example illustrates how facilitators experienced difficulties when they had to deal with a crisis during the session. The main discrepancy is that facilitators must work with the service user who is experiencing the crisis and support him, while also still dealing with the other group members who might not understand the sensitivity of a certain subject. Facilitator 4 mentioned that the preparation needs to be done right before each session to reduce these incidents. He stated that there could be unforeseen triggers for the service users: a word, a phrase, a sentence that might have a huge impact on one service user. The fact that the whole group would then have to deal with this situation could significantly influence the group dynamics – positively or negatively.

Flexibility

This theme captures whether Stepwise Relationships allows facilitators to modify the content of the sessions to tailor it to service users' needs. This theme overlaps to some extent with the previous one, and highlights the fact that the negative consequences of the crowded

agenda extended beyond impacts on group dynamics. The biggest issue for all facilitators was time. Timewise, there were no possibilities to further explore a any given topic – even when doing so would present a clear benefit – because the sessions are currently too full, as Facilitator 4 highlighted.

But with regards to the [service users], we've got it at one and a half hours, which is a bit short for the material because in delivering it, facilitators struggle to deliver all the material in the time allowed (...). It's more like a bit of an information-giving thing, planting a seed and do what you do with that, because there's not that much time to explore in a group any of the details.

Facilitators noted that if they had wanted to tailor the intervention to the needs of the service users, they would have had to prioritize what they felt was most important for their group during each session and shorten other parts to finish in time.

Regarding service users who were originally planned to attend the BBR intervention but ended up joining the Stepwise Relationship sessions, all facilitators mentioned that they focused on the aspects most important for these service users and tried to actively include them into the group sessions. Nevertheless, Facilitator 4 experienced a great deal of resistance from service users with a BBR referral, and mentioned that it was hard to deal with them correctly for such a short period of time. A more in-depth programme might be necessary for service users with a BBR referral to give them more time to internalize and understand the material. Facilitator 5 emphasized that the individual processes that the service users were going through are different for BBR and Stepwise Relationships.

I think they should probably extend the order if BBR was a requirement that was decided by the court. (...) BBR is a much more in-depth process, and I just think you can't really compare [BBR to Stepwise Relationships] much. (...) But I think the process that the participant goes through over those six months in comparison to those ten weeks is completely different.

All facilitators pointed out that the Stepwise Relationships intervention and the manual were not designed to cover a 24-week programme in 10 sessions, which makes Stepwise Relationships an inadequate substitute for those service users meant to receive BBR.

Recommendations for improvement included adding page numbers and approximate time requirements to the manual. Facilitator 5 advised having a two-hour block session instead of one and a half hours for each session. Facilitator 2 recommended restructuring Session 4, 'Objectivity and perspective taking', into two sessions. The session is about filters and thinking bias, and Facilitator 2 had the experience that there was too much information in the session, which made it difficult for the service users to follow. Furthermore, the facilitators suggested adding instructions about the video clips in the manual to make it easier for the facilitators to tailor the clips to the needs of their service users.

Training needs

This theme captures comments on the training that facilitators had for Stepwise Relationships as well as their recommendations for future additional support that they identified after the first run of the programme. Most facilitators attended an online training programme for Stepwise Relationships. One key theme the facilitators discussed was that they perceived their training to be insufficient because they had no time to prepare themselves. According to most of the facilitators, the materials had not been published by the time they attended the training, or the training was too short and felt more like a briefing. However, Facilitator 5 attended in-person training and indicated that s/he had an adequate amount of time to go through the manual before the training sessions.

So, the training was very thorough for us. (...) We had an adequate amount of time to go through [the manual and the workbooks]. (...) We all ran a specific session or like two exercises from one session. So, by the time I went into delivery, I kind of felt like I had an understanding of most of the content in the sessions because we'd seen it.

The fact that different teams rolled out the training for Stepwise Relationships differently had significant impact on how prepared the facilitators felt afterwards.

All facilitators had the experience that knowledge of BBR helped them to understand Stepwise Relationships. Facilitators 1 and 5 said that they needed their knowledge from previously accredited programmes like BBR and TSP (Thinking Skills Programme) to compensate for the lack of training for Stepwise Relationships. Without previous knowledge, they would not have been able to deliver the programme as intended because the manual and the training did not provide them with sufficient information.

Facilitator 1 and 2 suggested that there be more supervision and evaluation of Stepwise Relationships. Facilitator 5 highlighted the benefit of having time for a debriefing about the content of the Stepwise Relationships intervention with her co-facilitator after each session. Together, they would reflect on the session and what went well and what still needs to be improved. According to her, this improved the course and the delivery of the programme, even during the first run of the programme.

Engagement with content

This theme captures the content of Stepwise Relationship and whether service users could relate to it. I analysed facilitators' as well as service users' perceptions of the materials to determine if and how the Stepwise Relationships intervention promotes engagement with the content and the group. Facilitators 1 and 5 had the experience that service users would either agree or disagree with the content and the videos, which opened up room for discussion. In general, there was no agreement on how engaging and comprehensible the video clips were: some facilitators and service users suggested that they found the videos engaging, easy to follow, and relatable, with ample room for exploration. Other service users and facilitators indicated that some clips were not engaging enough and hard to understand. Service user 3 questioned if the style of the cartoons was appropriate for the content, because from his point of view the style of the videos undermined the content.

The content of all of them was okay. But obviously using cartoon characters, I don't think people [kept] paying much attention to it.

Facilitator 2 and 4 concurred with Service user 3's example, reiterating that some of the clips were not engaging for their service users. Facilitator 3 said that in these cases s/he actively needed to change the content to make it more interesting and appealing for service users.

Other recommendations for the clips concerned depictions of the characters. Service user 2 advised including other ethnicities into the clips to make them more engaging for everyone; Service user 3 suggested that actual people would increase identification with the actors and thus be more appealing than cartoons; Facilitator 2 mentioned that some of the accents were hard to understand and should be removed from the clips. Regarding the content itself, Facilitators 1 and 2 suggested including sample scenarios in the manual to provide the group with another narrative in addition to the one from the clips. This can open the room for discussion and a more in-depth understanding of the material.

Impact on service users

This thematic block captures the cognitive impact Stepwise Relationships has on the service users. It examines thought processes that the programme stimulated and that resulted in behaviour change among service users. Service users 1, 2, 6, and 7 suggested that attending Stepwise Relationships improved their way of thinking: they learned how to take a step back and think before they act.

My most important one is not let an argument get to a point where it's out of control.

I've learned how to argue healthily, so we both got to come to an arrangement, or both agree to each side of the story. (...) And what I've learned is [what to do] if it gets to a point where it can really hurt. So, I just walk away for 10 minutes (...) and then come back to the argument instead of just keep going until it gets out of hand.

Mirroring this chain of thought, service users said they learned how to value and respond to their own needs and that the intervention taught them what toxic behaviour is and

how it can be detected. Service users shared the experience that their awareness of abusive behaviour rose, and that they were able to have healthier arguments and calm down faster. To get out of a situation, service users said that they would actively use a time-out. Service user 6 summarized the situation by noting that due to Stepwise Relationships, he started to talk more with his new partner. He became aware how his behaviour could have an impact on his partner and other people surrounding him. Service user 7 concurred with this point of view and explained that the Stepwise Relationships intervention provided him with the necessary tools to have healthier arguments.

It was (...) exactly how I thought it was going to be (...) literally just about teaching you to step back enough and calm down a bit and realize (...) it's not just about you. It's about the person that you're going to affect in life. You've got kids or you've got family or their social lives. It's about all of it (...) not just in the heat of the moment.

Service user 7 learned how to respect other people's point of view and emotions. All service users said that the programme was beneficial for them and that they had since tried to implement the things that they had learned into their daily life. Stepwise Relationships taught them how to consider the perspectives of other people in an argument, but also how to value their own needs.

Impact on the DASO service

This thematic block evaluates how the implementation of the Stepwise Relationships intervention influenced the DASO service. As an IPV-related programme, the introduction of Stepwise Relationships also entailed an extension of the DASO service. To become familiar with the intervention, DASOs should also have had the chance to take part in some kind of training for the Stepwise Relationships programme. DASO 1, 3, and 4 stated that they had either no training for Stepwise Relationships, or that the training they attended was an unsatisfactory online presentation. In contrast, DASO 2 and 5 were satisfied with their training; DASO 5 echoed the opinion of Facilitator 5 regarding the advantages of in-person

training. She highlighted the fact that the training gave her the chance to experience the Stepwise Relationships sessions first-hand. Nevertheless, all DASOs interviewed expressed that more information about the Stepwise Relationships programme would have been useful for them; their understanding of the intervention was based on additional self-learning. DASO 3 emphasized that the DASOs needed more input to be able to discuss the intervention with the current or ex-partner of a service user more in-depth.

And where it's useful to know more about the programme is when you get someone who is curious, and wants to know a little bit more about 'what course is he going to do?' and 'how is it going to help him?' (...) I would like to have had a bit more training just so I can more confidently explain what the aims are, and what the approach is going to be, and some of the theory behind how it's been put together.

Being able to know what subjects will be discussed during the course can also help DASOs in cooperation with facilitators to reduce risk and help prevent the likelihood of IPV.

Same-sex relationships are another issue that the DASOs talked about: Stepwise Relationships is also designed to accommodate LGBTQ couples, which means that the (former) same-sex partner subjected to IPV could be referred to the DASO service. DASO 1 said that she would not feel comfortable working with same-sex couples without additional training because of different IPV dynamics compared to opposite-sex couples. DASO 4 said that it should be possible to forward the partner subjected to IPV to other projects that would be more suitable for them. In this case, DASOs need to know what kind of projects exist for LGBTQ couples that focus on IPV.

A key theme discussed with the DASOs was the ten-week limitation of the DASO service for the Stepwise Relationships intervention. DASO 2 raised concerns and suggested that she was not sure if the amount of time would be adequate to cover the needs of the (former) partners.

We have a lot more contact from [partners subjected to IPV] from Stepwise than we do [from] BBR, a lot more. They like us to be in touch more with them. (...) And the massive difference is the time you spend with them. Sometimes the 9 to 10 weeks spent with Stepwise isn't enough. (...) We could be her first point of contact, whereas with BBR we've got them for the duration of the BBR programme.

The major concern was that ten weeks might not be enough to work with a woman or man subjected to or at risk of IPV who had never been in touch with a victim service before. Even though all DASOs emphasized that they would provide the same emotional support for Stepwise Relationships partners, DASO 2 suggested that these partners need time to open up and discuss the sensitive issues with their DASOs. Ten weeks – or just five if the facilitators ran two Stepwise Relationships sessions per week – limits the DASOs' work mainly to identification and management of risk and signposting.

Another aspect includes the referrals the DASOs get from the facilitators with the information about the partner subjected to IPV. The DASOs get the referral for the (former) partner subjected to or at risk of experiencing IPV only when the facilitator thinks that an IPV-intervention is suitable for a service user. In the meantime, the intervention for the service user might have already started, and this might give the DASOs only five weeks to work with their clients.

Recommendations from the DASOs included their wish to join the facilitators' training for Stepwise Relationships right before the facilitators start delivering the intervention. Additionally, the DASOs indicated that they would like to extend their service to incorporate Stepwise Relationships. Regarding the referrals, DASO 2 advised including necessary information like the partners' address in the referral at the outset, to guarantee that DASOs can immediately start with their work. DASO 5 recommended that all professionals working on a given file should regularly exchange information to improve the case management of both the service user in Stepwise Relationships and the (former) partner.

Experiences of remote delivery via phone (case study)

This case study covers the remote delivery of Stepwise Relationships. *Service users' perceptions of remote delivery* captures one service user's individual experiences with one-to-one remote delivery and looks at the influence of remote delivery on the working alliance with the facilitator, as well as strengths and weaknesses of remote delivery. Additionally, experiences from in-person delivery are included to compare the two delivery modes. *Factors that influence the engagement with Stepwise Relationships* analyses individual and external circumstances that could positively or negatively influence the engagement of the service user with the intervention when delivered remotely.

Service users' perception of remote delivery

This theme focuses on the experiences of the service user in the remote delivery format and looks at similarities and differences with in-person delivery. Service user 5 had a phone call with his facilitator once a week. Even though he never met his facilitator in person, remote delivery felt more personal to Service user 5 than he imagined in-person delivery to be. He said he experienced an open and fully transparent relationship with his facilitator. Service user 5's experiences about the working alliance with his facilitator were like those described by the other service users in the in-person sessions: he suggested that he had a strong relationship with his facilitator, felt valued and respected, and could be open and honest. The only difference was that being alone in the sessions put pressure on him because he felt that he needed to answer all the questions all the time. Service user 5 described this as making him feel uncomfortable, because it felt like an interrogation. Service user 5 admitted that a group setting, where the facilitator's focus would have been evenly spread amongst all the other group members, might have made it easier for him.

If I viewed other people's stories and they would have been involved (...) it would have made me feel a little bit more at ease, I suppose, for when I was just on my own

and she asked me the questions straight off. It was some serious questions you'd ask, and then it made me feel quite concerned at first.

Service user 5 suggested that he was unsure if he was allowed to take some time and think about the questions before answering them. In this case, Service user 5 admitted that a group might have provided him with additional support and the opportunity to take a break. Additionally, he indicated that it would have been beneficial for him to listen to other peoples' stories and receive feedback and advice from peers.

Factors that influence the engagement with Stepwise Relationships

This theme focuses on the service users' individual and situational circumstances that may have influenced their own ability to respond to the remote delivery of Stepwise Relationships. Service user 5 attended the meetings while he was at work. His employer gave him the opportunity to have the conversation in a quiet place. Even though Service user 5 was not sure if he would have been able to keep the job if he had needed to attend the sessions in person, he admitted that a more private setting would have been a better place to participate in the calls. The content of one session addressed critical circumstances in his private life, and he was upset and distracted after the call. In retrospect, he admitted that going straight back to work after the session was dangerous because he ended the sessions in a vulnerable mental state.

I was going through a situation (...) and it was a very emotional situation I was in. I was always in tears and (...) I was coming off the phone, going straight back into a dangerous area and work. And my mind was not in the job, it was thinking of other things.

Service user 5 mentioned that even though he had a good relationship with his facilitator, those subjects were difficult to process. After the sessions, he would have liked to talk to someone about the content, as often takes place with in-person delivery, where group members discuss the sessions afterwards.

Discussion

This study evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of Stepwise Relationships as experienced by facilitators, service users, and DASOs. Service users and facilitators highlighted the positive aspects of group delivery, and service users experienced the improvement of their interpersonal communication and social behaviour over the course of the group sessions. Stepwise Relationships positively influenced the way service users dealt with obstacles in their daily life. The possibility to develop social skills, while being challenged and supported by other group members was a key theme in the interviews, for service users as well as facilitators, and they perceived this as one of the major benefits of in-person group delivery. Facilitators described that they had the possibility to tailor the content of Stepwise Relationships according to the service users' needs but as a downside had to shorten the remaining content of the session. The digital media clips were a useful tool for facilitators to condense the content, but service users indicated that they could only partially identify with the presented scenarios. Stepwise Relationships can be considered a useful addition to BBR, but according to facilitators and DASOs alike, it should not be seen as a replacement. The Stepwise Relationship intervention addresses low-risk cases and should be used with the service users it was designed for.

Group dynamics and interpersonal communication

The structure of the Stepwise Relationships intervention allows facilitators and service users to have a private one-to-one meeting before the group sessions. Facilitators described how these meetings can be used to build trust; service users have the chance to discuss the programme, personal issues, and any offence-related topics in this setting. One study about group psychotherapy with incarcerated offenders showed that being able to ask questions and discuss concerns in a one-to-one setting before the start of the group sessions can reduce group-related stress and anxiety in participants (Morgan & Flora, 2002). The preliminary one-to-one session is a unique strength of Stepwise Relationships and can be used establish

rapport between facilitator and service user. Rapport can be seen as the foundation for a successful and positive interaction between two parties (Abbe & Brandon, 2013; Ardito & Rabellino, 2011). In the Tripartite Model of Rapport by Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1987), rapport should be based on mutual attention, which requires an interest and engagement in the other person, positivity, which means that two people should experience the presence of each other as pleasant, and coordination, which describes the effective interaction between two people (Tickle-Degnen, 2006; Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990). Rapport can create a comfortable environment for the service users that motivates them to work on their problematic behaviour and results in positive behaviour change (Bordin, 1979; Clark et al., 2006; Horvath & Symonds, 1991; McNeill, 2009). Additionally, facilitators can use rapport to gain the service users' compliance about the task and goal of the intervention (Bordin, 1979; Ireland & Berg, 2008). Being understood and encouraged to share experiences with the facilitator and the group can motivate service users to cooperate (Bordin, 1979; McLeod, 1990, as cited in Marshall et al., 2003).

Service users who attended the Stepwise Relationships intervention described being able to openly talk about what happened to them in a non-judgmental group environment as the main benefit of the programme. From the service users' perspective, facilitators were able to create an atmosphere where the individual service users felt supported by their group members through positive feedback, but they also had the chance to question and criticize existing attitudes. Research about group-based interventions and psychotherapy has highlighted interpersonal interaction as an essential part of an ideal group culture and it improves perspective-taking, coping skills, and taking responsibility (Beech & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Roback, 2000). Service users in the Stepwise Relationships sessions expressed that being challenged by the group helped them to question their attitudes and raised awareness about toxic relationship behaviour. The therapeutic effect from talking to other group members, while being under the skilful direction of a facilitator, resulted in

improvements in self-esteem and confidence for the service users (Marshall et al., 2003; Morgan et al., 1999; Roback, 2000; Ross et al., 2008).

These positive findings need to be contextualized. The service user sample for this study consisted only of people who completed 100% of the intervention. Reasons to drop out of the programme could not be identified in this study. Another aspect is that all service users in the sample had a Stepwise Relationships referral, which reduces the possibility to say how Stepwise Relationships works for service users with a BBR referral. Follow-up evaluations should interview service users who left the programme before the end, as well as service users who had a BBR referral; this cohort might reveal issues the current sample overlooked. Adjusting the programme according to the needs of those who left before the end might reduce the attrition rate in the future.

Training and management strategies

Facilitators and DASOs emphasized that they would have preferred in-person training. The online training most facilitators and DASOs attended was unsatisfactory and not detailed enough. Knight and Stout (2009) evaluated probation management training in the UK in 2009. The researchers concluded that the facilitators they interviewed highlighted a gap between the work facilitators did and the training facilitators received, because aspects that facilitators needed to work effectively with their clients were not addressed in the training (Knight & Stout, 2009). The same results are valid to the evaluation of the online training for Stepwise Relationships: facilitators responded that the training they received did not fully prepare them for the work they needed to do. Facilitators and DASOs also felt they needed to compensate for the lack of training by gaining knowledge on their own or relying on other accredited programmes for information. Previous research has suggested that effective training should be a combination of more than one method: role-play can be helpful to deepen the understanding for an exercise; experiencing an intervention from the service users' perspective can help the facilitators to think about issues that might come up during the sessions (Beidas et al., 2012;

DiGennaro Reed et al., 2013; Jahr, 1998; Reid & Green, 1999; van Oorsouw et al., 2009).

These findings support the benefits of the in-person training for Stepwise Relationships, as one facilitator highlighted, due to the aforementioned reasons.

One reason why in-person training is not considered in the probation service can be the cost efficacy. Delivering distance learning programmes is cheaper than conducting in-person training for facilitators and DASOs (Knight & Stout, 2009; Treadwell & Mantle, 2007). But even though in-person training is more expensive than online training, it can increase the accessibility of the material. Facilitators and DASOs have two-way interaction with the trainer, and can ask for appropriate clarification of the material and content of the intervention if necessary (Reid & Green, 1999).

If online training is the preferred method for facilitators and DASOs, the current training needs to be revised (Mallonee et al., 2018). Following a lecture about how to apply the newly presented skills does not necessarily tell the facilitators and DASOs how to deliver the intervention. Mallonee and colleagues (2018) analysed online and in-person training for psychotherapy and concluded that distance learning programmes should give people the chance to exchange experiences or express and discuss concerns about an intervention. Additionally, technical deficiencies can interfere with a successful online learning experience (Mallonee et al., 2018). Facilitators and DASOs need to be trained to use the technical facilities and online tools they need to attend the training online.

Another tool for professional development can be debriefing, in which professionals analyse a situation and the behaviour they displayed (Maestre & Rudolph, 2015). Debriefing helps to examine training needs and the need for follow-up activities while running a programme (DiGennaro Reed et al., 2013; Maestre & Rudolph, 2015). Facilitators highlighted their lack of time for debriefing in the Stepwise Relationships intervention. Those facilitators who had the chance to debrief after sessions reflected on the positive impact of an expert discussion. Debriefing gave the facilitators the chance to include service users' feedback into

the following sessions, exchange experiences among the facilitators regarding the video clips and the exercises, and discuss the group dynamics. For debriefing to be effective, treatment managers should be familiar with the programme (Maestre & Rudolph, 2015), which is not the case for the Stepwise Relationships intervention as some facilitators suggested. This means that treatment managers could not give feedback on the individual facilitator's performance, due to their own lack of knowledge about the Stepwise Relationships programme.

DASOs expressed concerns that the implementation of the Stepwise Relationships intervention resulted in major safeguarding concerns for the current or ex-partners subjected to IPV. The implementation of Stepwise Relationships led to a mixture of cases, ranging from no established IPV patterns in a relationship to highly established patterns with service users that should have attended BBR instead of Stepwise Relationships. For Stepwise Relationships, the (former) partner only gets at most 10 weeks of support, which might not correspond with the established IPV pattern in the (former) relationship and reduces the DASOs work mainly to signposting. DASOs suggested that they wanted to be able to expand their service for the Stepwise Relationships partners if necessary.

Tailoring and engagement

The findings showed that timewise, facilitators had no possibility to be flexible. Flexibility resulted in reduction of the content and facilitators had to make a choice between targeting service users' needs during the sessions and sticking to the manual. The video clips were a helpful tool to summarize complex situations. The fact that the stories in the videos are coproduced with people formerly on probation should increase engagement and promote desistance amongst peers (Morris & Knight, 2018).

An increase in engagement was only partly the case for Stepwise Relationships. Service users who could identify with the media clips suggested that the videos helped them to verbalize their thoughts and they felt that the stories were useful for them, which is in line

with research in this topic (see Kip et al., 2018). The video clips improved behavioural skills related to the offence, and service users mentioned that they discussed the video situations with their group members and compared their behaviours in a similar situation (Kip & Bouman, 2021). Service users who could not identify with the video clips highlighted a mismatch between the content of the videos and individual circumstances. In this case, facilitators had to reframe the videos to match the video content with the service users' individual needs. Facilitators pointed out that a description of the video clips in the manual could be a helpful tool to solve this problem: having a short summary of each video clip would help facilitators to tailor the clips to the needs of their service users more effectively. This means that any videos irrelevant for the group can be skipped, while more important aspects of a session can be discussed in more detail.

Regarding the work with service users who were originally referred to BBR, all facilitators and DASOs shared the experience that these service users should not attend Stepwise Relationships. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the probation service had had a huge backlog for service users with a BBR referral who have run out of time. Some of these service users were sent to Stepwise Relationships to answer the request of the referral. All facilitators and DASOs indicated that instead of sending these service users to Stepwise Relationships, the referral should be extended to ensure that service users attend programmes that correspond with the intensity of the service users' needs. Bourgon and Armstrong (2005) evaluated the effect of the treatment intensity on service users at various levels of risk in prison. Their analysis revealed that those service users who received treatment that did not capture their needs had a greater recidivism rate. This was relevant especially for service users who needed more intense treatment but were allocated to a shorter and less intense programme instead (Bourgon & Armstrong, 2005).

For Stepwise Relationships, facilitators and DASOs observed something similar in the group sessions. From their point of view, the high intensity needs of service users with

medium- or high-risks of reoffending cannot adequately be met during the Stepwise Relationships sessions. Additionally, facilitators encountered resistance and a generally negative attitude in those service users who had a BBR referral. Building a relationship based on respect and dignity helped facilitators to break down the resistance of involuntary service users (Skeem et al., 2007), but facilitators mentioned that BBR clients influenced the group dynamics in a negative way.

Stepwise Relationships has the potential to be delivered to a wide range of people: service users can attend the programme in person or remotely. The case study showed that Stepwise Relationships could be delivered via phone. The main advantage of remote delivery is that it is more flexible regarding service users' work or family commitments than in-person delivery (Morland et al., 2015). A limitation of remote delivery is that facilitators have little control over the environment the service user is in. Niggemeier (2022), who evaluated remote delivery for Spectrum, a different IPV intervention, concluded that facilitators should ensure that service users leave the sessions in a stable mental state and take sufficient time before the end of the session to help the service user to calm down (Niggemeier, 2022). This shows that safeguarding is just as necessary for remote delivery as for in-person delivery to ensure the safety of the service users. The dangers for remote delivery are real: the service user who attended Stepwise Relationships remotely attended the calls in an environment that was not suitable and was left in a vulnerable mental state afterwards. He had no time to calm down after the calls before going back to work and had no one to discuss his feelings with.

Limitations

There are some limitations in this study that should be addressed. First, the facilitators were interviewed after Stepwise Relationships had just started. To be able to discover clear and obvious dangers as soon as possible, Stepwise Relationships had to be evaluated soon after the implementation. When considering the moment for the evaluation we were aware that facilitators and DASOs views might have been different if they had been interviewed six

months after they started delivering Stepwise Relationships instead of a few weeks. Our sample of facilitators had only been able to run the programme from beginning to end once or twice. This limitation was rather similar with respect to the DASOs. Some DASOs came from regions where they have not yet started delivering the intervention, which means that some considerations and recommendations are hypothetical. The hypothetical considerations of the DASOs regarding the delivery of the programme need to be evaluated in a follow-up study. Additionally, we were only able to collect self-reports, because currently there is not a sufficient evidence base to collect quantitative data documenting the programme's impact on service users. One reason for this is the relatively small sample; not many Stepwise Relationships interventions have taken place and not enough time to show change has elapsed.

Second, because only heterosexual male service users took part in this study, it is not possible to say how women and same-sex couples experience Stepwise Relationships. One of the core features of the Stepwise Relationships intervention is that it can be delivered to male and female people convicted of IPV in opposite- and same-sex couples. Since we were only able to interview heterosexual men, the same group almost all IPV-related interventions have traditionally targeted, we are not able to determine how the programme works for other groups. If the programme ran for a longer time by the time of the interviews, it would have been possible to have a more diverse sample, but then service users, facilitators, and DASOs might have been exposed to potentially dangerous situations. We accepted the fact that statistically most service users in the sample were heterosexual men because they are statistically the majority of participants in IPV-related interventions. Another weakness of the service user sample is that 100% completed the Stepwise Relationships programme. This means we do not gain an understanding of why people leave the programme.

A third limitation is that this study cannot give evidence for the efficacy of Stepwise Relationships or direct evidence for positive or negative outcomes. The main aim is to see

how Stepwise Relationships is experienced by service users, facilitators and DASOs, and how they would adjust the programme to make it more user-friendly or more tailored to the needs of service users.

Recommendations for the probation service

It is important that the training for Stepwise Relationships is more thorough to provide facilitators and DASOs with the knowledge they need to provide the programme as intended. More in-depth training could offer the opportunity for professional development, increase confidence, and facilitate the possibility for effective delivery of the Stepwise Relationships intervention to opposite- and same-sex couples. Differences in heterosexual and same-sex relationships can be discussed, and DASOs can be equipped with the necessary skills to work with LGBTQ groups. If the DASOs were upskilled, they would feel more comfortable about delivering good service to LGBTQ partners subjected to IPV.

Furthermore, the manual needs to be modified. Facilitators suggested that time specifications should be included into the handbook to give them practical recommendations of how much time a certain exercise would need. This can improve the delivering of Stepwise Relationships, because facilitators be less likely to run out of time. Adding a short description of each video clip may be useful for the facilitator to decide if a specific video corresponds to the group's needs. This way facilitators can exclude unnecessary video clips and spend more time focusing on subjects that are more important for their service users.

The delivery format is a key element of Stepwise Relationships, and a group setting is clearly optimal for the programme. If there is no other option than to deliver it remotely via phone, facilitators should emphasize that service users avoid conducting the calls during their work time or while they are doing other activities. Facilitators should highlight the fact that the content can trigger sensitive topics and that the service user might need some time to calm down after the session. Additionally, peer mentor support should be considered for remote

delivery to give the service users the chance to discuss challenging thoughts after a meeting if necessary.

Conclusion

This study explored the perception of Stepwise Relationships from the perspectives of facilitators, DASOs, and service users. Group delivery emerged as a major benefit of the programme and service users highlighted the impact other group members had on the way they perceived their own behaviour in relationships. The length and the content of individual sessions should be reconsidered for facilitators to be able to address the needs of service users. The training for DASOs and facilitators should be also restructured. Additionally, DASOs questioned the effectiveness of the ten-week length of their victim service for Stepwise Relationships. Stepwise Relationships can be delivered remotely, but it exposes the service user to real dangers when the conditions for remote delivery are not discussed in the preliminary session. All study participants agreed that the intervention was useful to address the needs of people convicted of IPV who have a low risk of reoffending.

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Appendix A

Topic guide facilitator

Version 1 – 18/01/2022
IRAS Project Number -



HM Prison &
Probation Service

Interview Schedule – Practitioner

Title of Project: A process evaluation of stepwise relationships: a structured intervention for people to develop healthy relationships

Interview number: _____ Place: _____
Date: _____ Time: _____
Researcher: _____ Duration: _____

Background Information

- ✓ Please describe your role in the probation service
- What is or what would you like your area of specialism to be in?
- Have you completed core skills or the facilitator engagement skills training?
- Approximately how many times have you delivered stepwise relationships?
- What delivery format have you delivered stepwise relationships?
[1:1/group, F2F/ remote] and what would be your preference in delivery format?
- Have you delivered structured interventions to people that have needed help with their relationships?

Training

- How well did the training prepare you for delivering stepwise relationships?
- How could the training be improved for stepwise relationships?
- Would you require any additional training needs for delivering stepwise relationships?

Perceptions of delivering stepwise relationships

- What did you think about stepwise relationships?
 - What did you think worked well? / What did you think did not work well?
 - o Was the order of sessions in stepwise relationships logical?
 - o How user friendly did participants find stepwise relationships?
 - o Did stepwise relationships meet the treatment needs of participants?
 - o What sessions did you enjoy delivering and why?
 - o What sessions did you find difficult to deliver and why?
 - o Were there any particular sessions that you found to be most impactful for participants and why?
 - o Were there any particular sessions that you found to be least impactful for participants and why?
 - o How would you improve stepwise relationships?
- What support networks have been available to you during the delivery of stepwise relationships?
 - Management support networks
 - Co-delivery support
- Are the timings for planning, delivery and follow up sufficient for stepwise relationships?
- How have you delivered stepwise relationships to participants?
 - 1:1 or group
 - f2f or remote

What are the advantages of 1:1 delivery?

What are the disadvantages of 1:1 delivery?

What are the advantages of group delivery?

What are the disadvantages of group delivery?

What are the advantages of F2F delivery?

What are the disadvantages of F2F delivery?

What are the advantages of remote delivery?

What are the disadvantages of remote delivery?

Core threads in structured interventions

- Did stepwise relationships adopt a strengths-based approach? If yes/ no, please explain your answer.

The use of digital media clips in stepwise relationships

- What did you think of the digital clips in stepwise relationships?
 - What digital clip did you like delivering and why?
 - What digital clip did you not like delivering and why?
- Did the digital clips help you deliver stepwise relationships for participants with different learning styles?
- Did participants relate to the content or scenarios within the digital media clips?
- Did the digital content meet the individual needs of participants?
- How can we improve the digital clips in stepwise relationships?

Perceptions of engagement with stepwise relationships

- To what extent has stepwise relationships extended the treatment options available to people on probation?
- How has stepwise relationships compared to previous interventions for people on probation?
- What concerns did the participants have when you were talking to them about stepwise relationships?
- Were there any benefits for participants attending stepwise relationships?
- Were there any negative outcomes for participants attending stepwise relationships?

Ongoing professional development

- Do you feel confident in delivering stepwise relationships to participants with identified relationship difficulties?
- Has delivering stepwise relationships facilitated the opportunity for ongoing professional development?
- Do you feel that stepwise relationships is sufficiently quality assured to ensure a consistent standard of service?

Concluding question

- Overall, how successful do you feel you have been in your delivery of stepwise relationships in a probation setting?

Demographics

- 1). Gender: female, male, prefer not to disclose
 - 2). Age Category: 18-29, 30-49, 50-69, 70 years or over
 - 3). How long have you worked in the probation service?
 - 4). How long have you been a facilitator)?
 - 5). Have you delivered BBR?
 - 6). Have you delivered any previous domestic abuse structured interventions? Yes/No, If, yes what structured intervention (Help, Spectrum, Positive Pathways +)
 - 5). What region do you represent?]
-

Appendix B

Topic guide service user

Version 1 – 18/01/2022
IRAS Project Number -



HM Prison &
Probation Service

Interview Schedule – People on Probation

Title of Project: A process evaluation of stepwise relationships: a structured intervention for people to develop healthy relationships

Interview number:

Place:

Date:

Time:

Researcher:

Duration:

Expectations of stepwise relationships

- Who told you about the intervention stepwise relationships?
- Did you complete any work before attending the intervention with your probation officer? If yes, please describe what you did
- What were your initial thoughts of being referred to stepwise relationships?
 - Did you have any concerns about attending stepwise relationships? (nervous, group work, content of programme etc..)
 - Did you foresee any obstacles in attending stepwise relationships? (times, work, etc..)

Perceptions and experiences of stepwise relationships

- How was stepwise relationships delivered to you?
 - 1:1 or group
 - f2f or remote

1:1 delivery

- What did you like about 1:1 delivery?
- What did you dislike about 1:1 delivery?
- What are your thoughts on attending a group setting?

Group delivery

- What did you like about group delivery?
- What did you dislike about group delivery?
- Did you find the perceptions and experiences of other participants useful?

F2F delivery

- What did you like about F2F delivery?
- What did you dislike about F2F delivery?

Remote deliver

- What did you like about remote delivery?
- What did you dislike about remote delivery?
- Did you face any challenges with remote delivery?

- How would you describe stepwise relationships to a person who was about to start the programme?
 - Did you find stepwise relationships easy to understand? Did you notice anyone in the group struggling with anything?
 - Was there a particular week that you liked the most and why?
 - Was there a particular week that you disliked the most and why?
 - Did you learn any new skills in stepwise relationships?
 - Is there anything from the programme you can say you have used in your daily life since completing?

Did you receive support from a peer mentor when participating in stepwise relationships?

- If yes, please describe your experience
- If no, please discuss if you would have liked support from a peer mentor

- Would you say that you benefited from participating in stepwise relationships?
- How could we improve stepwise relationships?

- Would you recommend stepwise relationships to a peer?
- Overall, how did you find participating in stepwise relationships?

The use of digital media clips in stepwise relationships

- What did you think of the digital clips in stepwise relationships?
 - What digital clip did you like and why?
 - What digital clip did you not like and why?
- Did the digital clips helped you understand the learning?
- Did you relate to the content or scenarios within the digital media clips? If yes, which one and why? If no, which one and why?
- Do you feel that the digital content would appeal to a variety of people? (different ethnic groups, age groups, same sex relationships)
- How can we improve the digital clips in stepwise relationships?

Perceptions and experiences of facilitators delivering stepwise relationships

- Did you feel welcomed by facilitators delivering stepwise relationships? What things made you feel welcomed/unwelcomed?
- Did you feel supported by the facilitators delivering stepwise relationships? What things made you feel supported/ unsupported?
- What else could the facilitators do to improve stepwise relationships?

Real life application of stepwise relationships

- Would stepwise relationships help you with challenging situations in the future?
- Is there anything that you would still struggle with post completing stepwise relationships?
- Did stepwise relationships help with the following?
 - coping strategies / improving confidence / managing stress etc.

Feelings towards continuing probation order

- What are you currently feeling positive about?
- What are your future hopes?
 - aims, plans or achievements

Appendix D

Topic guide DASO

Version 1 – 18/01/2022
IRAS Project Number -



HM Prison &
Probation Service

Interview Schedule – Domestic Abuse Safety Officer (DASO)

Title of Project: A process evaluation of stepwise relationships: a structured intervention for people to develop healthy relationships

Interview number: _____ Place: _____
Date: _____ Time: _____
Researcher: _____ Duration: _____

Background Information

- Please describe your DASO role in the probation service
 - What does your caseload look like?
 - What are your key responsibilities?
 - How do you approach working with your clients?
 - What does a day in the life of a DASO look like?
 - o Are you able to describe anonymously a case example?
 - Who do you work with (internally; facilitators, probation practitioners etc.,)
 - Who do you work with (externally: other criminal justice agencies, third sector charities etc.,)
 - Why is your role important for the probation service?

Training

- Did you receive any internal training on stepwise relationships?
 - If yes, please describe
 - o How did you find the training?
 - o How could training be improved for your role?
 - o Would you require any additional training needs for your role?
 - If no, please describe
 - o How have you or will you adapt to working with your clients without training?
 - o What obstacles will you encounter without training?
 - o What would DASO training on domestic abuse interventions look like to you?

Domestic Abuse Arena – Stepwise Relationships

- How are clients referred to the DASO service from stepwise relationships?
 - What works well?
 - What needs to be improved?
- Will there be a difference, or do you expect a difference in your caseload in comparing BBR and stepwise relationships?
 - Inclusion criteria
 - Exclusion criteria
 - Demographics of clients (men, same sex etc.,)
 - Types of domestic abuse (emotional, financial, social media, stalking etc.)
 - Minimum service level offered
- How would you summarize stepwise relationships to your clients?
- What does or will the DASO service look like for stepwise relationships?
(are there similarities / differences to BBR)
- What is your initial impression of the structured intervention stepwise relationships?
 - Approach
 - Theoretical basis
 - Length of programme
 - Target group of programme
- How have you or would you manage the expectations of clients whose partner is participating in stepwise relationships?

Perceptions of stepwise relationships - victims

- What did OR do you expect your clients to think about their current or ex-partner attending stepwise relationships? (rehabilitation v punishment argument)
- What, if any are the benefits of a domestic abuse structured intervention for your clients?
 - What, if any are the negative outcomes of a domestic abuse structured intervention for your clients?
 - From a victim service viewpoint, how can we improve stepwise relationships?
-

- Do you have any further comments?
-

Demographics

- 1). Gender: female, male, prefer not to disclose
- 2). Age Category: 18-29, 30-49, 50-69, 70 years or over
- 3). How long have you worked in the probation service?
- 4). How long have you been DASO (previously PLW, WSW)?
- 5). Have you provided the DASO service for BBR clients? Yes/No
- 6). Have you provided the DASO service for DA Structured interventions before? Yes/No, If, yes what structured intervention (Help, Spectrum, Positive Pathways +)
- 5). What region do you represent?

Appendix E

Verbal consent form facilitator, service user and DASO

Version 1 16/01/2022
IRAS Project Number -



Verbal Consent Form

Stepwise Relationships – Practitioner

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Rebecca Woolford. I am the Research and Evaluation Manager for the Probation Reform Programme at Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.

Hi, my name is Anna-Lena. I am a MSc Student from the University of Twente.

We would like to conduct the interview with yourself today

- **Project details and aims:** We want to investigate the implementation of the structured intervention stepwise relationships into the probation service. Specifically, this study aims to examine the potential of stepwise relationships to:
 - challenging thoughts and emotions
 - work through problems
 - and build more positive relationships with others
- **Interviews:** I will have a conversation with you for 45 minutes either by [telephone or video conference] where I will ask a range of questions about your views and experiences of participating in stepwise relationships; what did you think worked well and what needs to be improved.
- **Audio recording:** With your permission, I would like to make an audio recording using a Dictaphone of our discussion to make sure I'm getting an accurate record of the interview. The audio recording will be sent to an official transcript company and then I will delete the audio from the device.
[Instead of recording you, I can take notes in my notebook].
- **Data storage:** I will store your interview transcript safely and confidentially on the probation service network. The interview transcript will be kept for 5 years after academic publication.
- **Identifiable:** Pseudo-names will be used in the MSc thesis and any future academic publication. For example, participant 001, 002 and 003. The risk of identifying you will be minimal as I will only use extracts or quotes in the findings.
- **Confidentiality:** Your interview answers will be kept confidential and anonymous. Confidentiality will only be breached if you disclose that you are going to put yourself or others at risk.
- **Risks:** There are only minimal risks involved in taking part in the interviews due to the subject area of violence and anger. In order to reduce any potential risks, you can choose whether to answer a question or not, pause for a break or stop the interview all together.
- **Rights:** You don't have to take part; you can ask me any questions you want before or throughout; you can also withdraw at any stage of the interview without giving a reason without it impacting your probation order or future invitations to take part in research. After the interview you can withdraw your information/ data until (31/12/2022).
- **Publication plans:** The project will be published in an internal report and in an academic journal.

	Tick
1). Do you give your permission for me to audio record your interview?	

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2). Do <u>you have</u> any further questions?	
3). Do you agree to take part?	

Ok, thanks, let's start.

Verbal Consent Form

Stepwise Relationships – People on Probation

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Rebecca Woolford. I am the Research and Evaluation Manager for the Probation Reform Programme at Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.

Hi, my name is Anna-Lena. I am a MSc Student from the University of Twente.

We would like to conduct the interview with yourself today

- **Project details and aims:** We want to investigate the implementation of the structured intervention stepwise relationships into the probation service. Specifically, this study aims to examine the potential of stepwise emotions to:
 - challenging thoughts and emotions
 - work through problems
 - and build more positive relationships with others.

We want to have a conversation with you today for approximately 20 minutes on your experiences of Stepwise Relationships. We will ask you a range of questions that will explore what you liked or disliked about the programme so that we can improve it for other people participating in stepwise relationships. There are no right or wrong answers.

- **Interviews:** I will have a conversation with you for one hour either by [telephone or video conference] where I will ask a range of questions about your views and experiences of participating in stepwise relationships; what did you think worked well and what needs to be improved.
- **Audio recording:** With your permission, we would like to make an audio recording using a Dictaphone of our conversation to make sure we are getting an accurate record of the interview. The audio recording will be sent to an official transcript company and then I will delete the audio from the device.
[Instead of recording you, I can take notes in my notebook].
- **Data storage:** I will store your interview transcript safely and confidentially on the probation service network. The interview transcript will be kept for 5 years after academic publication.
- **Identifiable:** Pseudo-names will be used in the internal report and academic publication. For example, participant 001, 002 and 003. We have already spoken to eight people. Everyone will be given a pseudo-name for example participant 001, 003 and 009 so you will not be identified. The risk of identifying you in the internal report and academic publication is minimal as I will only use extracts or quotes in the findings.
- **Confidentiality:** Your interview answers will be kept confidential and anonymous. Confidentiality will only be breached if you disclose that you are going to put yourself or others at risk.
- **Risks:** There are only minimal risks involved in taking part in the interviews due to the subject area of violence and anger. In order to reduce any potential risks, you can choose whether to answer a question or not, pause for a break or stop the interview all together.
- **Rights:** You don't have to take part; you can ask me any questions you want before or throughout; you can also withdraw at any stage of the interview without giving a reason without it impacting your probation order or future invitations to take part in research. After the interview you can withdraw your information/ data until (31/12/2022).
- **Publication plans:** The project will be published in an internal report and in an academic journal.

Version 1 16/01/2022
IRAS Project Number -



	Tick
1). Do you have any questions?	
2). Do you give your permission for me to audio record your interview?	
3). Do you agree to take part?	

Ok, thanks, let's start.

Verbal Consent Form

Stepwise Relationships – Practitioner

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Rebecca Woolford. I am the Research and Evaluation Manager for the Probation Reform Programme at Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.

Hi, my name is Anna-Lena. I am a MSc Student from the University of Twente.

We would like to conduct the interview with yourself today

- **Project details and aims:** We want to investigate the implementation of the structured intervention stepwise relationships into the probation service. Specifically, this study aims to examine the potential of stepwise relationships to:
 - challenging thoughts and emotions
 - work through problems
 - and build more positive relationships with others

In addition, we want to include the voice of victim services to gain an understanding of what is working well and what needs to be improved for domestic abuse structured interventions from the perspective of the DASO service

- **Interviews:** I will have a conversation with you for 45 minutes either by [telephone or video conference] where I will ask a range of questions about your views and experiences of participating in stepwise relationships; what did you think worked well and what needs to be improved.
- **Audio recording:** With your permission, I would like to make an audio recording using a Dictaphone of our discussion to make sure I'm getting an accurate record of the interview. The audio recording will be sent to an official transcript company and then I will delete the audio from the device.
[Instead of recording you, I can take notes in my notebook].
- **Data storage:** I will store your interview transcript safely and confidentially on the probation service network. The interview transcript will be kept for 5 years after academic publication.
- **Identifiable:** Pseudo-names will be used in the MSc thesis and any future academic publication. For example, participant 001, 002 and 003. The risk of identifying you will be minimal as I will only use extracts or quotes in the findings.
- **Confidentiality:** Your interview answers will be kept confidential and anonymous. Confidentiality will only be breached if you disclose that you are going to put yourself or others at risk.
- **Risks:** There are only minimal risks involved in taking part in the interviews due to the subject area of violence and anger. In order to reduce any potential risks, you can choose whether to answer a question or not, pause for a break or stop the interview all together.
- **Rights:** You don't have to take part; you can ask me any questions you want before or throughout; you can also withdraw at any stage of the interview without giving a reason without it impacting your probation order or future invitations to take part in research. After the interview you can withdraw your information/ data until (31/12/2022).
- **Publication plans:** The project will be published in an internal report and in an academic journal.

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 IRAS Project Number -



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	Tick
1). Do you give your permission for me to audio record your interview?	
2). Do <u>you have</u> any further questions?	
3). Do you agree to take part?	

I will be here on the capacity as a researcher ONLY. Before we start are you comfortable for Rebecca to be present during the interview with her connection to the DASO development work?

Yes - Rebecca remains in interview

No – Rebecca leaves interview

Ok, thanks, let's start.