

Bridging the Data Divide

What we found, what MAPPA is, and why it matters to your work

A guide for third-sector organisations in the North East

The Oswin Project | March 2026

This guide summarises the findings of a three-month research project led by The Oswin Project as part of the North East Combined Authority's DWP Economic Inactivity Trailblazer programme. If you work with people who have left prison, or are thinking about it, this is written for you.

It covers what we found, what MAPPA is and why it matters to voluntary organisations, and what we think needs to change. We have kept the language as plain as possible and cut out most of the academic framing. If you want the full report, that exists too.

About The Oswin Project

The Oswin Project is a prisoner rehabilitation charity based in the North East. We work inside and outside HMP Northumberland through social enterprises including cafes, gardens, and bike shops. 70% of our staff have lived experience of the criminal justice system.

1. The Problem We Were Trying to Understand

When someone leaves prison, they should be walking out with everything they need to rebuild their life: proof of the qualifications they earned inside, a summary of their health needs, their medication, details of who their probation officer is, and a clear picture of what support is waiting for them in the community.

In practice, most of that information either does not travel with the person or arrives in a format that is impossible to use. Health records do not follow people to their new GP. Qualifications sit in a digital system that switches off the moment someone leaves the prison gate. The physical folder that is supposed to carry certificates is often incomplete and underfunded.

We call this the data divide. And it has a direct impact on whether people manage to stay out of prison, find work, and become part of their community again.

The numbers behind it are stark. Only 17% of people leaving prison find work within a year. The annual cost of someone reoffending is estimated at between £37,000 and £50,000 to the public purse. These are not inevitable figures. They are the result of a system that regularly fails at the handover point.

What changed in 2014

Before 2014, probation trusts ran embedded pre-release planning. Probation officers worked inside prisons in the final weeks before someone was released, building relationships and making sure the handover into the community was managed properly. Physical resettlement packs were standard. That system was broken up by the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms. Most of what made it work disappeared. The data divide we see today is largely a direct consequence.

2. What We Did

Over three months, we spoke to a wide range of people and organisations to understand where the system was failing and what practical solutions might look like. This was a research and co-design project, not a programme delivery. Nothing we developed was implemented or tested in practice during this phase. What we produced were tools and proposals ready to be taken forward with proper funding.

We gathered evidence from:

- 18 people who had recently left prison, including five in-depth follow-up interviews with people under MAPPA supervision
- 24 employers across two confidence workshops, from sectors including social care, housing, and customer service
- 15 third-sector organisations at a dedicated engagement day
- Staff at HMP Durham, including the Head of Education and the Prison Employment Lead
- Two senior retired MAPPA professionals, Deborah Alderson (former Chief Inspector, Northumbria Police) and Winton Keenen (former Chief Constable, Northumbria Police)

We analysed everything together to find the patterns that appeared across all sources, not just the most interesting individual stories.

3. What Is MAPPA and Why Does It Matter to You?

MAPPA stands for Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements. If you work with people leaving prison, especially those who have served sentences for serious or violent offences, some of the people you support will be subject to MAPPA. It is worth understanding what that means.

The basics

MAPPA is a legal framework that brings together police, probation, and prison services to manage the risk posed by certain offenders in the community. It is not a single organisation. It is a set of arrangements that sits across those three statutory agencies.

There are three levels:

- Level 1: Standard licence management, handled mainly by probation with occasional police involvement. This covers the majority of MAPPA cases.
- Level 2: Active multi-agency management, where a regular panel of agencies meets to coordinate the risk management plan. Used for higher-risk individuals where one agency alone is not enough.
- Level 3: The highest level, involving senior representatives from multiple agencies for the most complex cases. This is used rarely but for the most serious situations.

There is also an informal Level 4, used for exceptional cases such as counter-terrorism or foreign national offenders, which is not publicly documented but acknowledged by practitioners.

Who is included

MAPPA applies to three categories of offenders. Category 1 covers registered sex offenders. Category 2 covers violent offenders sentenced to 12 months or more in custody. Category 3 covers other offenders who are assessed as posing a risk of serious harm. People can move between categories and levels as their risk assessment changes.

What it means in practice

For someone subject to MAPPA, almost every aspect of their daily life is shaped by their management plan. This can include curfews, exclusion zones, restrictions on who they can contact, requirements to attend appointments, electronic monitoring, and conditions on where they can live and work. Breaching any of these conditions can result in recall to prison.

From the perspective of a third-sector organisation, this matters for several reasons. The person you are supporting may have constraints you are not aware of. They may not be able to take a job you have found them because the workplace is in an exclusion zone. They may not be able to attend a session you have arranged because it conflicts with a supervision appointment. And they may not be able to tell you why, because some conditions are confidential.

The information problem for third-sector organisations

Right now, third-sector organisations have no formal role in MAPPA. You may be providing intensive support to someone who is subject to a complex risk management plan, but you will not be told what that plan contains. You cannot contribute what you know about the person's progress or needs to the people making decisions about them. This creates a gap that serves nobody well, including the statutory agencies trying to manage risk.

4. The Real Challenges of MAPPA: What We Heard

Our conversations with senior MAPPA professionals and with people actually living under MAPPA supervision gave us a much more nuanced picture than the official framework suggests. The system is well-intentioned and, in the right circumstances, effective. But it also has some deep structural problems that third-sector organisations need to understand.

From those managing MAPPA

Winton Keenen, former Chief Constable of Northumbria Police, described the system bluntly as:

"Demand-rich and capacity-poor." Winton Keenen, retired Chief Constable, Northumbria Police

Police tend to lead MAPPAs because of their task-oriented culture, but that can create an imbalance in how cases are approached. Risk management and enforcement can crowd out rehabilitation and resettlement. Higher-level cases consume so much resource that medium-risk individuals receive inconsistent attention depending on who happens to be chairing meetings that week.

Keenen also identified what he called personality-driven inconsistencies. How MAPPAs are applied in practice depends heavily on the values and approach of the individuals involved. The statutory framework gives agencies considerable discretion. That discretion can be used progressively or defensively.

Deborah Alderson, who developed the MATAC model (which focuses on perpetrators rather than victims alone and has achieved a 65 to 72% reduction in reoffending since 2014), identified cultural resistance as a major barrier. When she first proposed focusing resource on perpetrators, the response was:

"Why do I want to spend time talking about perpetrators? I'm here to support victims." Initial reaction from colleagues to the MATAC model

That culture, she argued, has not fully shifted. Risk aversion within MAPPAs is partly about genuine public protection, but it is also partly about agencies protecting themselves from scrutiny if something goes wrong. Bureaucracy, as Keenen put it, functions as both shield and sword.

Both professionals were also clear that this does not have to be how it works. There is genuine space within the existing rules for a more collaborative, rehabilitation-focused approach. The question is whether those running MAPPAs choose to use it.

From people living under MAPPAs supervision

The five detailed interviews with MAPPAs-supervised individuals were some of the most important conversations of the entire project. They described an experience of supervision that was simultaneously protective and exhausting, structured and dehumanising, necessary and insufficient.

Participant E had been out of prison for eight weeks when we spoke to him. He had not missed a single appointment, had complied with every condition, and was living by the rules of his hostel. He was still on a 7pm to 9pm curfew:

"It's just getting a bit frustrating now, because I'm trying to get my life back. It is a battle. It's a battle with everyone and everything." Participant E

Participant D had been released and placed in a MAPPAs category that he felt did not accurately reflect his risk. He was being managed alongside people he considered much higher risk, with the same procedures applied regardless. His response to being told he was a high risk to the public but was being released anyway:

"I know you're talking bollocks." Participant D

This is not someone rejecting the idea of supervision. It is someone telling the system that it does not make sense to him and that the lack of coherent explanation makes it harder, not easier, to engage with it.

Participant A had a genuinely positive relationship with his probation officer and valued the structure that supervision provided. But the electronic monitoring tag created daily practical difficulties and felt like a constant announcement of his status. The technology was experienced as surveillance rather than support.

Across all five accounts, the pattern was the same. Supervision was tolerated, sometimes valued, but rarely experienced as something that helped people move forward. What made the difference in those cases where people were managing well was not the statutory framework. It was the third-sector support sitting alongside it.

"I think it's the support now. Support off Junction 42." Participant A

Boredom and isolation emerged repeatedly as the most significant day-to-day risk factors. These are not small concerns. They are documented triggers for the kind of decisions that lead to recall. Participant C described locking himself away in his flat, having nothing to do, and recognising in himself that boredom was becoming dangerous:

"Boredom, I think, is a bit of a trigger." Participant C

These accounts matter for third-sector organisations because they describe exactly the gap that voluntary organisations are well placed to fill: the consistent, trusted, flexible human presence that statutory supervision cannot provide at the required intensity.

The exclusion of the third sector from MAPPA meetings

Every single organisation at the third-sector engagement day raised this. You are expected to support people who are subject to MAPPA, but you have no formal role in the process that governs their lives. You receive referrals without knowing the risk management plan. You cannot contribute what you know about someone's progress to the people making decisions about them.

One participant put it directly:

"We do exceptional work with ex-offenders and have proven success in reducing reoffending, yet we are not part of the reporting bodies at MAPPA meetings."

This is not just frustrating for the organisations involved. It actively makes risk management worse. The relational trust that third-sector workers build with MAPPA-managed individuals is exactly the kind of intelligence that statutory agencies need but cannot generate themselves. It is currently being wasted.

Both Alderson and Keenen supported the principle of formal third-sector involvement in MAPPA Level 2 and Level 3 meetings, with appropriate vetting and information-sharing agreements. Keenen specifically proposed the idea of third-sector Information Bridge Workers who could contribute relational insight to meetings without taking on statutory responsibilities.

5. What People Leaving Prison Told Us

Across all 18 interviews, the first weeks after release were described as overwhelming. The word that came up most often, from people across very different situations, was cliff-edge.

Housing was the single biggest practical problem, raised by 15 of 18 people. Not having a stable address makes almost everything else impossible: registering with a GP, claiming benefits, taking a job, complying with licence conditions. Participant B had done everything

right. He had sorted his bank account and his ID while still inside. But months after release, housing was still unresolved:

"The only thing that I haven't got is my housing. That's it. That's no change."
Participant B

Documentation gaps affected 14 of 18 people. Even when qualifications had been earned, certificates were missing, incomplete, or in a format that employers did not recognise. Health records did not follow people to their community GP. People were repeating their story to every new agency they encountered, which was exhausting and often counterproductive.

What made the difference, in almost every account where things were going reasonably well, was third-sector support. Not statutory supervision, not digital systems, not better paperwork. A real person, available on a human timescale, who could help navigate a system that otherwise felt designed to exclude.

6. What Employers Told Us

The employer findings are relevant to third-sector organisations for a specific reason: if you are helping someone into work, you need to understand what employers are actually thinking, rather than assuming the worst.

The headline finding was that employers are more open than most people assume. The average risk score across two workshops with 24 employers was 3 out of 5. The most common words they used to describe their attitude were Trusting, Opportunity, and Second chances. This is not a hostile audience.

What employers needed in order to move from maybe to yes was practical: a clear disclosure process, confirmation that a third-sector organisation was available to support the person and answer questions, and reassurance that they were not taking on the probation officer's job. One employer summarised it well:

"The disclosure coaching bit is what would actually move me from maybe to yes. I don't want to do this alone."

That is a significant opening for third-sector organisations. Employers are not asking for guarantees. They are asking not to be left alone with a situation they do not know how to manage.

7. The Tools We Co-Designed

Three practical tools came out of the project. None of them require a new system to be built. All of them are ready to be taken forward.

The Prisoner Passport

A physical folder, co-designed with HMP Durham staff, that brings together everything a person needs on release day in one place they can carry with them. Proposed contents include verified certificates, a health summary, a medication list, appointment cards for the first three post-release appointments, a simple local map with key locations marked, a disclosure letter template the person helped write while still inside, and a contact sheet showing who is supporting them.

The format is deliberately paper-based. Many people leaving prison do not have a working phone or reliable internet access in the first days. The passport is designed to be immediately usable, not dependent on digital access.

The Employer Confidence Handbook

A set of practical one-page guides co-produced by employers during the workshops. It covers when and how to ask about criminal history, how to handle that information in line with data protection law, how to assess risk in a structured way, and where to get support. It is designed to sit in an HR file and be picked up on the day an application comes in from someone with a criminal record.

The Information Bridge Worker

A proposed staffing model in which a lived-experience worker is embedded at the prison reception and release hub, working alongside prison staff in the weeks before release to complete the passport, support disclosure planning, and make warm introductions to community services. After release, the Bridge Worker remains a point of contact for both the individual and for employers or housing providers who have questions.

For MAPPA-managed individuals, the Bridge Worker would also have a formal role as an observer or contributor in MAPPA Level 2 and Level 3 meetings, providing the relational intelligence that statutory agencies currently cannot access.

8. What This Means for Your Organisation

If you work with people leaving prison, this research confirms what most of you already know from experience: the statutory system provides structure and public protection, but it cannot deliver the relational support that people actually need to stay out of prison and build a life. That is not a criticism. It is a description of what statutory services are designed to do. The gap is real, and third-sector organisations are the ones filling it.

What this project adds to that picture is a clearer understanding of where the gaps are largest, what makes them worse, and what practical tools could help close them. It also makes a specific argument that third-sector organisations should be formally included in MAPPA processes, not because that is administratively convenient, but because the evidence shows it would produce better outcomes for everyone, including better public protection.

Specifically, the findings suggest three things for organisations in this space:

- If you are supporting someone under MAPPA supervision, you are working in an information vacuum. Advocating for formal inclusion in MAPPA processes is not an overreach. It is a reasonable ask, backed by evidence and supported by senior figures within the statutory system.
- Employer reluctance is real but it is not fixed. Structured disclosure support and the offer of an ongoing third-sector contact are the two things most likely to move an employer from no to yes. If your organisation is not yet offering that as part of your employment support work, the Employer Confidence Handbook gives you a practical starting point.
- The Prisoner Passport concept is simple enough to be adopted locally without waiting for a national policy change. If your organisation has relationships with a local prison, the co-design work done in this project gives you a template to work from.

A Final Word

The data divide is not inevitable. It is the result of policy decisions made over the past decade that broke up a system that, for all its imperfections, was built around the idea of continuity. Rebuilding that continuity does not require a technological revolution or a complete redesign of the criminal justice system. It requires practical tools, trusted relationships, and a willingness to include the organisations that are already doing the most effective work.

Third-sector organisations in the North East are not peripheral players in resettlement. They are central to it. This project makes the case for recognising that formally, funding it properly, and giving it the structural role it has earned.

Want to know more?

This guide is a summary. The full report contains detailed findings from every strand of the research, including full thematic analysis, employer archetypes, MAPPA professional discussions, and the complete Prisoner Passport co-design process. Contact The Oswin Project for a copy or to discuss how your organisation can get involved in the next phase of this work.