

Effectiveness, Efficiency and Impact in Restorative Justice: Navigating the Subjective and Objective to Evidence Success

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Abstract

The international debate around institutionalisation in restorative justice reveals tensions in service evaluation between maximalist definitions advocating for professionalisation within criminal justice systems and purist definitions aiming to disrupt traditional justice systems. Evaluations offer important metrics for understanding the success of restorative justice, but academics argue that these metrics misalign with restorative justice values. These were highlighted amongst other concerns from academics, practitioners and those with lived experience at the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Restorative Justice inquiry, which recommended further investigation into service evaluation. Evaluation is crucial for evidencing service success in effectiveness, efficiency and impact but often aligns with dominant forms of measurement. This research aims to explore the criteria that practitioners use to define success, builds on the inquiry recommendation and adds to academic literature by using thematic analysis of questionnaire survey data from professionals with lived experience to explore their definitions of effectiveness, efficiency and impact in restorative justice. This paper aims to understand how institutionalisation impacts practitioners' definitions and where lived experience challenges or offers new success metrics. It highlights the multi-faceted nature of success in restorative justice and identifies potential methods for recording, monitoring and evaluation to support evidencing success.

Keywords: professionalisation, institutionalisation, transformation, monitoring, evaluation,

1. Introduction

Restorative justice is at a paradoxical moment in its development. While its reputation and evidence base grow, with impactful processes integrated into global systems and policies (Gustina, Sunatri, Rogers, Suud & Alwahdy, 2024; Kimbrell, Wilson & Olaghere, 2023; Latimer, Dowden & Muise, 2005; Maglione, Marder & Pali, 2024), success-driven institutionalisation risks subsumption by the very systems underlying the philosophy of restorative justice critiques (Pali & Maglione, 2021). Concerns exist that institutionalised restorative justice is being reshaped by dominant ideologies (Soulou, 2024).

Despite this debate, the presence of restorative justice in global policies and systems is increasing. Organisations like the Restorative Justice Council (RJC) in the UK, the International Institute of Restorative Practice (IIRP) in the US and the European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ) codify practice, provide standards and support sector development. However, evidencing effectiveness is a key, often overlooked, aspect of the institutionalisation debate. Evaluation, while rigorous and standardised (OECD, 2021; Shapland, 2022), can align with maximalist definitions, potentially conflicting with purist views that prioritise relational, dialogical processes and citizen-centred outcomes (Gade & Chapman, 2022; McCold, 2000).

Calls for relational evaluation exist (Llewellyn, Archibald, Clairmont & Crocker, 2013; Olson & Sarver, 2022). While they can be critiqued for promoting restorative justice exceptionalism (Levin, 2022), this reflects a belief that current evaluations underrepresent the success of restorative justice. Llewellyn et al. (2013: 286) argue that success measurement should not be limited by traditional tools and that efforts should be made to develop methods for assessing relational values despite ‘the fact that the ambitions and value of a relational approach to justice is not easily captured by existing measures’.

In the UK, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Restorative Justice (APPG-RJ, 2022b) inquiry highlighted misconceptions about restorative justice success, including an overemphasis on reoffending reduction and face-to-face processes. They advocated for broader outcomes like distance travelled, safety, and wellbeing (APPG-RJ, 2022b), and called for guidance on data collection and evaluation (APPG-RJ, 2022a: 19). However, data standardisation remains a challenge in England and Wales (Fisk, 2023).

This paper explores practitioner-defined success criteria, addressing empirical and practical knowledge gaps in institutionalised restorative justice. Through thematic analysis of survey data, it contributes to future evaluation frameworks that embrace the complexities of lived experience. It identifies synergies with current evaluation methods and explores practitioner-driven metrics to capture restorative justice’s essence while preserving core values.

By empowering the sector to define success, this fosters opportunities for beneficiaries and advances progressive criminal justice systems. The paper begins with a literature review on institutionalisation and measurement, followed by methodology, findings on efficiency, effectiveness, and impact, and a discussion and conclusion on institutionalisation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Institutionalisation

Institutionalisation is understood as being how restorative justice is ‘integrated into criminal justice processes, used as an instrument of penal policy, and in practice more professionalised and standardised’ (Butler, Maglione & Buchan, 2022: 2). Institutionalisation has occurred in the majority of Western nations and many other states, resulting in concerns that ‘earlier visions and promises’ of purist definitions have ‘given way to a more instrumental and institutional variety of RJ practices’ (Wood & Suzuki, 2016:1). The move towards institutionalisation and professionalisation in the field of restorative justice is evident in the increasing number of services embedded within criminal justice systems, education settings, social work and other public sectors (Aertsen, Daems & Robert, 2006; Maglione et al., 2024; Pali & Maglione, 2021). In criminal justice, this includes a growing presence in policy, for example in the development of the *United Nations Handbook of Restorative Justice* (UNODC, 2006, 2020), the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)8 to ‘develop and use restorative justice with respect to their criminal justice systems’ (Council of Europe, 2018), and the 2021 Venice Declaration on the role of restorative justice in criminal matters (Council of Europe, 2021).

Restorative justice processes and services are embedded in the criminal justice systems of many countries, including Iraq (Ali Al-Hassani, 2021), China (Zhang & Xia, 2021), Canada (Roach, 2012), Australia (Wood, Suzuki, Hayes & Bolitho, 2021), New Zealand (Tauri, 2014), Italy (Mannozi, 2024), the United Kingdom (UK) (Marder, Branwell-Moore, Hobson & Payne, 2023) and the USA (Battjes & Zane Kaplan, 2023). In this context, restorative justice processes are on their way to becoming a ‘contemporary justice mechanism’ (Daly, 2016), a regulated transaction between stakeholders that can be measured for effectiveness and satisfaction and subjected to greater empirical and theoretical enquiry if conceptually defined in this way (Wilson, Olaghere & Kimbrell, 2017). Pali & Maglione (2021: 515) describe this as a shift to professionalised, transactional ‘product services’ which are regulated by the state and have a growing requirement to perform, record and evidence practice.

However, integration has occurred in multiple ways (Maglione et al., 2024) on a spectrum of purist and maximalist approaches (McCold, 2000) that highlights how

institutionalisation is far more complex than a theoretical dichotomy would suggest. Top-down maximalist institutionalisation is seemingly at odds with purist bottom-up values-driven definitions (Llewellyn et al., 2013; McCold, 2000) or a 'principles-based approach' of just relations that goes beyond the formal justice system (Anderson, Islam & Li, 2025; Llewellyn, 2021: 385). Research that explored institutionalisation of restorative justice in Scotland found that practitioners challenged the narrow dichotomy of purism and maximalism in the expansion of restorative justice nationally in their advocacy for a locally sensitive but coordinated approach consisting of local and bottom-up processes and national referral pathways (Butler, Maglione & Buchan, 2022). Much of this was identified as stemming from scepticism of their governments approach, serious issues with the allocation of funding and the perceived 'impossibility of detaching RJ from the criminal justice system' (Butler, Maglione & Buchan, 2022: 17).

The institutionalisation of restorative justice as a contemporary mechanism (Daly, 2016) has prompted concerns about mainstreaming, bureaucratisation and standardisation, potentially undermining its disruptive philosophy (Butler, Maglione & Buchan, 2022; Maglione, 2021; Pali & Maglione, 2021; Shapland, 2014). This includes a shift towards a functional 'product service' (Pali & Maglione, 2021: 515), potentially neglecting the needs of service users in favour of systemic requirements. Hobson and Payne (2022) emphasise the importance of locally reflective services, differentiating between community-led and institutional models. Services inherently reflect their developmental context, responding to varying social, political, physical and economic needs (Hobson, Payne, Bangura & Hester, 2022). For instance, the bureaucratic and managerialist nature of the English and Welsh criminal justice system (Jones & Newburn, 2009; McEwan, 2011) fosters standardisation. In contrast, US provision is largely shaped by human service non-profits (Moore & Lawrence, 2023), while Sierra Leonean initiatives address post-conflict needs through economic opportunity (Hobson & Payne, 2022).

Concerns also exist regarding integration of restorative justice and its communitarian focus (Crawford & Newburn, 2002). Pali & Maglione (2021: 517) argue that managerialist approaches are often 'taken-for-granted' in restorative justice policy. A Canadian survey found 85 per cent of restorative justice stakeholders favoured standardised measurement, although concerns were raised about reduced community control and flexibility (Asadullah & Morrison, 2021). Professionalisation and institutionalisation are viewed by some as undermining core values, 'sterilising the transformative potential' and reinforcing state dominance (Braithwaite, 2002; Maglione, 2021: 5; Shapland, 2014). In response, ethical and principle-driven practice

frameworks have been developed (Kirkwood, 2022) and Italy has legislated for ‘restorative outcomes’ (Mannozi, 2024). The practical manifestation of these outcomes remains a key interest.

The perceived loss of a communitarian focus due to professionalisation and institutionalisation is of concern to some. This potentially minimises the transformative potential of restorative justice and reflects a broader commodification of crime control, reinforcing discrimination and systemic racism (Tauri, 2016). Tauri (2023: 46-48) critiques the appropriation of Indigenous narratives by ‘plastic shamans’ to sell a ‘restorative justice product’ that reasserts settler-colonial control. Pali and Maglione (2021: 517) also express concerns about standardisation’s ‘implicitly violent character’ when applied to young people, minorities and Indigenous communities. However, practitioners demonstrate a nuanced understanding of institutionalisation, transcending purist dichotomies (Butler, Maglione & Buchan, 2022; McCold, 2000; Pavlich, 2005). A ‘movement’ approach (Johnstone, 2008; Kirkwood, 2022) addresses concerns about institutionalisation limiting the ability of restorative justice to address structural harm and inequality (Llewellyn, 2021; Rossner and Taylor, 2024). There is also concern that institutionalisation could see restorative justice ‘corrupted’ and strengthen corrupt institutions (Rossner and Taylor, 2024: 363).

Across these debates, restorative justice faces a paradox: at once more desirable, more established and more available to those that might benefit from its processes; yet at the same time, potentially less transformative, less authentic and less restorative as it moves away from its philosophical roots. The challenge is to navigate this paradox given that the integration and institutionalisation of restorative justice services are now a firm part of the criminal justice agenda. In this paper, we contend that one potential route through this is for the sector to be more engaged in shaping how that integration takes place. In particular, we argue that a key site for this engagement is how services that provide restorative justice construct ideas of success, particularly when required to do so as part of evaluations of processes and their outcomes.

2.2 Measuring success

Services often struggle with outcome definitions, which frequently reflect criminal justice contexts rather than restorative justice approaches (Doak & O’Mahony, 2018). This can lead to services conforming to external success definitions. The EFRJ has sought to help understand how we can evaluate restorative services (Shapland, 2021; 2022) and the APPG-RJ, the APPG-RJ has brought together academics, policymakers, service delivery organisations, members of

the Criminal Justice system and practitioners to explore how to understand success (APPG-RJ, 2022a; Marder et al., 2023).

Services have long collected quantitative data, such as McCold's 'minimal recording' which suggested collection of numerical data including referral and participant numbers; preparation time; number and length of meetings; and participant surveys of satisfaction and fairness (Roche, 2003: 182). UK Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) collect similar data, with victim-focused data reports returned to the Ministry of Justice (Fisk, 2023). However, concerns remain that the right things are not recorded; that something is missing: 'all that is of value may not be quantifiable or measurable' (Llewellyn et al., 2013: 286).

Increased monitoring and evaluation, driven by impact evidence and public funding justification, is central to standardisation. Yet, evaluation is not value-free. Even empirical data collection is subjective, shaped by evaluator needs and ideologies, a 'process of determining the merit, worth, and value of things' (Gullickson, 2020; Scriven, 1991: 1). Evaluations are subjective tools, they require the setting of clear definitions and measures (Shapland, Robinson & Sorsby, 2011). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provide definitions of 'effectiveness' (Is the intervention achieving its objectives?), 'efficiency' (How well are resources being used?) and 'impact' (What difference does the intervention make?) that can be applied to a range of policies, strategies, programmes, projects or activities (OECD, 2021: 37).

Evaluating restorative justice is challenging (Hamad, Shapland, Kirkwood, Bisset & Edginton, 2020; Shapland et al., 2011). For instance, defining success in restorative work is often regarded as highly subjective in nature (Doak & O'Mahony, 2018). Evaluations have focused on process and outcomes (Presser & Van Voorhis, 2002), but measuring restoration and reparation is complex and there is limited research focused on victim recovery (Suzuki, 2023). Satisfaction and perceived fairness, tracked in England and Wales (Fisk, 2023), correspond crudely to feeling harms have been repaired (Presser & Van Voorhis, 2002: 174).

Hamad et al. (2020: 17) outline three main types of service evaluation: process, impact and economic evaluations. These are concerned with correct implementation of policy and practice (process), achievement of outcomes (impact) and 'value-for-money' (economic). There are significant strengths and weakness to either approach, including cost, timeliness, reliability, bias and levels of expertise (Hamad et al., 2020: 19). These evaluation types are not mutually exclusive and are frequently run concurrently within a single project.

Process evaluations cover service delivery (Shapland, 2022). Outcome evaluations, considered more complex in the context of restorative justice, address victim safety (Angel et

al., 2014), case satisfaction compared to traditional justice approaches and recidivism (Strang, Sherman, Mayo-Wilson, Woods & Ariel, 2013). Recidivism is a complex metric. Defined broadly in terms of reoffending, rearrest, reconviction or reimprisonment, recidivism has a variety of static and dynamic risk factors (O'Connell, 2020: 10), making it difficult to measure as interpretation of this term can vary practically, and measurement depends on the length of time captured (Shapland et al., 2008: 20). Individual practitioners and services may also not have access to the type of data required to be able to routinely evidence recidivism.

The collection of process and outcome data might be routine, for example a requirement within a funded contract to evidence where and how money is being spent, and to provide direct comparison between restorative interventions and other processes. They might also be one-off events, for example as the Ministry of Justice funded 'Shapland trials', which are considered seminal evidence of the effectiveness of restorative justice in reducing reoffending, increasing stakeholder participation and growing satisfaction with the process (Shapland et al., 2011). The recent randomised controlled trials of Family Group Conferencing services across multiple English local authorities also highlighted beneficial outcomes including service effectiveness and significantly fewer children going into care (Taylor et al., 2023).

Value-for-money evaluations include metrics that place a monetary value on outcomes, such as cost-effective reductions in repeat offending, victim satisfaction, improvements to victim health, reintegration into the labour market or the community, family reconciliation and other such processes whereby participants are more able to contribute to social life (Grimsey Jones et al., 2023; Shapland et al., 2008; Sherman et al., 2015; Strang et al., 2013).

Marder et al. (2023) advocate for principle-aligned standardisation. Llewellyn et al. (2013), Doak and O'Mahony (2018), and Olson and Sarver (2022) call for nuanced evaluations aligned with restorative justice values including restoration, participation, and engagement (Doak & O'Mahony, 2018; O'Mahony & Doak, 2017), relationship focused, contextual, and democratic (Llewellyn et al., 2013), and a restorative index that enables measurement of the restorativeness of a service (Olson & Sarver, 2022).

These approaches are complicated for several reasons. Firstly, the lack of unified agreement on what constitutes restorative justice (Paul & Borton, 2017). Process-based and outcome-based definitions often appear mutually exclusive within academic literature, although research has demonstrated that a values and principles-based approach can encompass both (Anderson et al., 2024). Restorative justice approaches can be viewed as a pyramid, with values as a foundation, on which practices skills are built, which lead to a pinnacle of restorative outcomes (Hopkins, 2004; 2009). Secondly, that there are many ways that restorative processes

might be applied including direct, partially direct, indirect and discrete interventions (Hobson & Payne, 2022). Thirdly, there is a perspective that only processes that involve the victim, the offender and the community in various roles should be regarded as ‘fully restorative’ (Wachtel, 2016: 4). Finally, and partly as a product of the first two, that restorative programmes are implemented and integrated into criminal justice systems in a wide range of different ways, with different intended outcomes, and serving different groups. As Olson and Sarver (2022: 945) argue ‘[...] our knowledge about the success of restorative justice is limited to outcomes that are questionably related to restorative justice and that are based on differing definitions of restorative justice as found in reviews of programs in criminal justice and education’.

In England and Wales, PCCs fund restorative justice, with data reported to them. In 2022, an estimated £5m was spent on restorative justice across the 42 PCC areas in England and Wales (Why Me?, 2022: 2). The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) collects annual data from PCCs but faces criticism for frequent changes to metrics and a lack of transparency due to data remaining unpublished (APPG-RJ, 2022b; Why Me?, 2021; 2022). In addition, each PCC area may require additional data for their own reporting (Fisk, 2023); the commissioned services, some of whom are large national organisations, will also have their own reporting processes for their service delivery teams; and services or individual practitioners that have sought certification from the RJC will also have to provide information on their practice in order to attain and maintain that award.

The consequence for evaluation is a plethora of reporting mechanisms, of varying length, depth and quality with no universal measure for effectiveness, efficiency or impact. There is no common language, method or process for recording and monitoring data (Cawley, Kewley, Burke & Wager, 2023; Fisk, 2023), which makes service-level comparison challenging. However, there is movement towards standardisation, with new youth justice KPIs (MoJ, 2023a, 2023b) and APPG-RJ recommendations for further investigation to develop guidance for gathering and using data to monitor and evaluate restorative justice (Hobson, Fisk, Hook & Jaffé, 2023).

3. Method

This research adopts a social constructivist and interpretivist methodology, exploring subjective meanings in contextual experiences (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005). This is justified by varying restorative justice evaluation perspectives (Doak & O’Mahony, 2018; Llewellyn et al., 2013; Olson & Sarver, 2022; Shapland, 2022; Shapland et al., 2011). Despite concerns of greater institutionalisation within a managerialist criminal

justice system, service data lacks standardisation and the public have limited understanding of what constitutes success in restorative justice (APPG-RJ, 2022a; Fisk, 2023; Maglione et al., 2024). This highlights how reality is socially constructed, multi-layered and complex rather than singular and verifiable (Cohen et al., 2005). This study explores practitioner-defined success criteria, recognising their involvement in nuanced practice (Crotty, 1998). Understanding emerges through interpreting contextual experiences, reaffirming a social constructivist approach (Bacon, 2005; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

An online questionnaire survey, conducted via Microsoft Forms from September 2022 to April 2023, gathered data from 70 self-defined restorative justice practitioners. Participants defined effectiveness, efficiency and impact in their work. This method facilitated broad participation, minimised administrative challenges, enabled explicit separation of responses by category for data analysis and eliminated interviewer effects (Clark, Foster, Sloan & Bryman, 2021). Participants were asked to provide definitions of terms using the following questions: ‘What does it mean for restorative work to be “effective”?’, ‘What does it mean for restorative work to be “efficient”?’; and ‘What does it mean for restorative work to have “impact”?’. Online qualitative surveys provide rich subjective accounts, capturing participant language and offering a ‘wide angle lens’ while minimising interviewer effects (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun, Clarke & Gray, 2017; Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey & McEvoy, 2020; Terry, Braun, Jayamah & Madden, 2018; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004).

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used (Clark et al., 2021). Potential participants were identified through the publicly accessible contact information data of registered practitioners and organisations with the RJC (n=98) and family group conference (FGC) service providers (n=88) from the Family Rights Group (FRG). These organisations are sector representatives, involved in training and advocacy for restorative approaches. Furthermore, social media (Twitter and LinkedIn), charity and interest group outreach, and sector event attendance was leveraged to identify potential participants. Email contact yielded a 9.68 per cent response rate (n=18), with social media and networking accounting for 74.29 per cent (n=52) of the total sample.

Table 1: Survey participant job role and organisation type

Organisation type	Type of role
Youth Justice/Offending	RJ Practitioner
Team	RJ Service delivery manager
	RJ Lead

Organisation type	Type of role
Criminal Justice RJ Team	RJ Worker
	RJ & Community Engagement Lead
	Director
	RJ Practitioner
	RJ Service Delivery Manager
	RJ Deputy Service Manager
	RJ Volunteer manager
	RJ Facilitator
	RJ Coordinator
	RJ Team Operational Manager
	RJ Advanced Practitioner
	Senior Case Manager
	Case Manager
	Restorative and Mediation Service Manager
	Restorative and Mediation Coordinator
Academia	Academic
	Postgraduate Researcher
Schools	Principal
	Teacher
Police Officer	Operational Lead
	Neighbourhood Policing Supervisor
	Anti-social Behaviour Officer
Government Department	RJ Volunteer Manager
HMP/YOI	Prison Chaplain
	RJ Volunteer Facilitator
Training	Coach
	Trainer
	Course Coordinator
Consultancy	Consultant
	Evaluator
Local Authority (Education and Social Care)	FGC Team Manager
	FGC Coordinator

Organisation type	Type of role
	RP Service Lead
	Operational Manager
	RP Learning & Organisational Development Officer
	Local Authority Research Lead
	RP Worker
	RJ Coordinator
Restorative sector	Communications Officer
organisation and charities	Practice Adviser

Respondents were predominantly UK-based (n=61), with additional responses from New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the US. Participants provided 43 distinct job titles across 11 organisation types. 20 per cent held senior leadership roles (n=14), 37 per cent held multiple roles (n=26) and 44.29 per cent worked within criminal justice representing 14 different police constabulary areas (n=31), prisons (n=2) or were active police officers (n=3). Further breakdown is limited to protect anonymity.

Data was analysed using an interpretivist constructionist approach via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013), using NVivo 12. An inductive approach was used, focusing on repetitions, similarities and differences (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Response lengths varied, leading to multiple codes. Themes emerged in each definitional category: efficiency of costs and practice; effectiveness of process delivery, outcomes and participant perspectives; and subjective and objective interpretations of impact.

Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Gloucestershire. Limitations include UK overrepresentation, potential self-selection bias and English language use, which may have limited access for non-English speakers.

4. Findings

The findings of this research are presented under the three concepts that participants were asked to define: efficiency, effectiveness and impact. These themes and their constituent sub-themes are shown below (Table 2) and are outlined and discussed in the following sections.

Table 2: Themes identified from questionnaire data requesting participant definitions of efficiency, effectiveness and impact in restorative work.

Finding	Theme	Sub-theme
Efficiency	Practice	Quality
		Skills
		Reliability
		Participant focus
		Time
		Risk management
		Barriers
	Cost	Cost-effectiveness
		Cost Prevention or Minimisation
	Rejection of efficiency	Hinder process
		Lack of relevance
Effectiveness	Process	Practitioner practice
		Restorative Principles
		Working With
	Outcomes	Transformation
		Needs
Impact	Subjective	Defined by participant
		Felt by the participant
	Objective/Demonstrable	Change/Difference
		Positive effect
		Movement

4.1 Efficiency

The most notable theme identified for efficiency was practice. Codes related to cost also emerged, and a theme of participants refusing to submit a definition by directly rejecting the concept of efficiency was also identified.

4.1.1 Practice

Codes related to practice were found in 82 per cent of responses (n=52). Efficiency was frequently defined in relation to the role of the practitioner or the service, including actions and

behaviours that can affect efficiency. Responses reflected ‘process’ and ‘outcome’ definitions (Presser & Van Voorhis, 2002). For example, ‘Efficiency is achieved when practitioners work relentlessly to achieve the required outcomes for participants’ contrasts the use of ‘[...] organised and structured processes [...]’ to achieve efficiency.

Respondents described strengths and qualities that highlight how practitioners view their own role as essential to a service operating in an efficient manner, with practice quality assurance, within flexible but structured frameworks. These include: high levels of skill; actively setting targets; effectively managing risks; facilitating dialogue and communication; and doing what you say you will do, without overpromising. Responses highlighted careful balancing within efficient practice, with practitioners being ‘risk aware, without being risk averse’, ‘timely and streamlined’ with ‘neither rush nor delay’. What is done by practitioners with the time they spend working with participants is subjective and contextual, and a component of their practice and professional judgment: ‘[...] efficiency is about spending the right amount of time with the right people throughout the process’. Barriers to efficiency were primarily related to wider system bureaucracy, such as accessing participant information of those who have caused harm or been harmed, and service capacity.

Time and practitioner attributes intersect, highlighted succinctly by one respondent: ‘Victims are responded to in a timely manner by an experienced and knowledgeable member of the team. Interventions delivered are of a high quality, monitored and evaluated.’ Another respondent noted: ‘We have minimum expectations for all of our practitioners based on the hours worked per week. This enables us to measure the efficiency of service delivery.’ This outlines the differences in role and perspective of respondents within organisations delivering restorative work. Practitioner effort, participant benefit and time were intersecting codes. ‘Achieving success with minimum effort and inadvertent adverse effects’ contrasts ‘short term effort leads to long term benefits’. Specific timescales for service processes were not included in efficiency definitions, although many services collect this data (Fisk, 2023). Individual practice contributes to service efficiency, but wider systemic components were also identified. ‘Taking as long as is needed, but no more. Having systems that are flexible, to meet the needs of each participant and ensure practitioners are providing a high level of service.’

Time underscores the delicate balance required of practitioners, whose careful coordination of restorative processes can mitigate service dissatisfaction and secondary victimisation arising from delays. However, practitioners’ control over timeliness is often constrained by external factors related to other stakeholders, necessitating careful navigation of referral intake, case allocation and meeting participants’ needs. Investment in comprehensive

training, accreditation and approaches to peer and managerial supervision that include regular practice observation are vital for enhancing operational efficiency.

Efficiency as practice, in terms of the service functioning and quality, suggests that providing restorative interventions is an objective itself, which can be measured by traditional process evaluations (Hamad et al., 2020; Shapland, 2014), but also the restorativeness of a service should be included in this process (Olson & Sarver, 2022). There is a lack of research into restorative facilitator skill and outcomes, although evidence suggests there may be a relationship (Latimer et al., 2005). Professionalisation is a key element of institutionalisation for ensuring service quality, whilst standardised training and supervision play pivotal roles and can contribute to measures of restorativeness (Butler et al., 2022).

4.1.2 Cost

Efficiency and cost were described by 10 per cent (n=7) of respondents, summarised succinctly by one, 'that it prevents cost, both physically, emotionally and financially'. Responses included 'resources' and 'energy' applied to work, relative to 'benefit' or 'change'. Such definitions offer a more nuanced approach than financial cost-benefit which is seen across the literature in terms of service evaluation and success. However, variation in what 'cost' is or how it is measured adds uncertainty to the meaning of broader definitions provided, such as 'costs should outweigh or be equal to the outputs' or 'activities required the least use of resources, material, human, emotional'.

Cost 'benefit' differs from cost 'prevention', 'reduction' and 'minimisation'. These terms relative to emotional costs are subjective and contextual compared to material and financial components, highlighting the complexity of efficiency when applying this concept to working with people who have harmed or been harmed, and the restorative values that practitioners apply when delivering a service. These variations highlight different efficiency tolerance levels that may exist at the practitioner and service level.

4.1.3 Rejection of the concept

A further 10 per cent of respondents (n=7) rejected efficiency as a concept in restorative work. An overt conceptual rejection was not evident in effectiveness or impact definitions, suggesting the distinctiveness of efficiency from these other concepts. Participants described how 'efficiency' did not exist in restorative work, was 'not measured', 'not useful' or could 'hinder processes'. One respondent preferred the use of 'agile' as opposed to 'efficient', rejecting connotations of speed in such definitions. Services also needed 'luck' to reject

efficiency, '[...] we are lucky that our contract does not require us to place timelines on our work. We do not require parties to have achieved certain milestones within a dictated timeframe [...]'

4.2 Effectiveness

Effectiveness consisted of two themes, outcome and process, which reflects traditional definitions of restorative justice (Presser & Van Voorhis, 2002).

4.2.1 Outcomes

Outcomes were coded across 45 per cent of respondents (n=32) with two sub-themes: transformation-based and needs-based. Transformation outcomes consisted of changes in 'attitudes', 'behaviours' and 'beliefs'. The 'movement' of individuals, 'in a healthy and more positive way than they were able to before', and 'empowerment' of participants. They also included receiving 'some sort of benefit', or 'gaining something', and for practitioners to be able 'to evidence that work with families is making a positive difference'.

Participants having their needs met or the outcomes being 'appropriate to the needs of all involved' included whether 'views or experience has been validated and understood'. Furthermore, being given a voice and views being 'heard and included' were types of outcomes linked to need. 'If parties felt that they had their needs met, whatever those needs were and whatever the support looked like, then our process has been effective.'

Both personal and programmatic transformation intersect with discussions around professionalisation and in turn institutionalisation. Kirkwood (2022: 4) describes transformation as a 'prudential value' of practice, linked to recovery from harm, which aligns with the needs and desired outcomes of participants. Transformation constitutes a 'restorative outcome' (Mannozi, 2024), illustrating how subjective concepts can be enshrined in legislation to institutionalise restorative justice on the sector's terms. Respondents emphasised that the right amount of transformation for the participant is vital, challenging assumptions that a lack of transformation implies a flawed process. As transformation takes various forms, it must align with the participant's needs (Kirkwood, 2022: 3).

Working to, meeting or achieving needs requires input from the participant. The extent to which a participant believes or reports that their perceived needs have been met, their views and voice have been heard and they feel listened to and validated are also subjective and likely temporal in nature. The emotive component in terms of 'feel' and 'believe' suggests that these are not tangible concrete elements. There is a significant communication element in terms of

‘voice’, ‘hearing’ and ‘listened to’ which connects with ideas of restorative processes being dialogue based (Gade & Chapman, 2022).

Outputs were identified as the predominant information collected by PCC-commissioned restorative justice services in England and Wales (Fisk, 2023), contrasting a preference among respondents for evidencing success through outcomes. Hamad et al. (2020) uses logic models to differentiate these when designing professionalised restorative justice services. Outputs typically comprise quantitative data such as the number of processes and restorative agreements, while meeting needs and facilitating transformation for participants closely align with their definition of outcomes (Hamad et al., 2020: 21). Outputs may signal underlying factors warranting further investigation by managers or commissioners. It may act to ensure the greatest potential for transformation and meeting participant needs.

However, identified outcomes are not caveated with the need to ‘complete’ a process. These could occur during preparation, at the point of a conference or other intervention type. They may not occur until sometime after a process has concluded. Tracking these elements, and selection of appropriate points in time to track, could be burdensome.

4.2.2 Process

Respondents defined effectiveness in relation to process in 40 per cent of responses (n=28). Two further sub-themes emerged: practitioner skills and actions; and process participant behaviours.

Skills and actions included application of ‘the key principles of restorative practice to engage with restorative participants’. This included ‘facilitating engagement, collaboration, and interaction’ using ‘a person-centred approach, especially for victims to avoid re-victimisation’. Provision of ‘clarity and consistency’ for participants whilst ‘ensuring aims and outcomes for all involved are establish early, always referenced back to’.

Participant behaviours included those that occur within a restorative process or are emergent as a result of being involved in one. Processes are effective if participants have ‘had their say in decision making process’ or ‘people affected by a problem are a significant part of the solution’. Additional definitions included ‘collaboration among parties to the process’ and the degree to which ‘all participants are engaged with the process’.

Actions and behaviours as part of a process are not routinely reported by services (Fisk, 2023), but could be captured by participant feedback, or service documentation like case records, supervision notes or case studies. Engagement and collaboration are complex metrics that are open to subjective assessment and could require observation that may impact on the

impartiality of a process. Interpretation of engagement can be at odds with the principle of voluntariness (Sawin & Zehr, 2007). Evaluations, particularly in terms of the opportunity to interview practitioners and participants, could elicit this kind of information generally, but would be a snapshot. Producing this data on a case-by-case basis would be inherently burdensome on the practitioner in terms of paperwork.

4.3 Impact

Subjective and objective impact emerged as the two key themes, incorporating the perception of a participant in judging the impact upon themselves (self-defined), or an external form that includes observation by a professional or specific countable measures (observed). The themes emerged individually and sometimes together, as in the following quote:

Impact is what difference does it make, or what change happens as a result of the work. It may be a change in thinking or action, a change in perspective, a change in behaviour. In restorative work, impact can happen at the intrapersonal, relational or system levels.

Subjectivity of perception, definition and ownership of outcomes in terms of personal experience were common sub-themes. Respondents noted that ‘participants experience self-defined positive outcomes from the restorative process (whatever type that may be)’. One respondent noted how ‘impact can come in different forms and it differs for each service user’, whilst another highlighted the challenge this brings for evaluation as subjective impact is ‘hard to measure as it will be different for each individual who goes through the process’. Respondents also alluded to process definitions, defining impact as participants being engaged in ‘finding solutions themselves’ and gaining ‘a sense of agency and power’ or feeling that ‘the process focused on what is most important for them’. This further reinforced the individual and subjective nature of impact.

Objective impact definitions frequently reference a ‘measurable outcome’ or evidence of ‘demonstrable and positive changes in individuals, groups and organisations’ that are ‘lasting, measurable’ and involve ‘discernible change over time’. Other stakeholders are included, with observation of ‘tangible change’ such as ‘improved relationships between family members and family members and professionals’. The challenge inherent in this theme is how this is measured:

If it were possible to have an alternate timeline – one where parties engaged with RJ and one where they didn’t – you should be able to see a difference between the two.

Participants outlined the subjective and objective impact of the process in the form of the outcomes achieved, and the extent of transformation as an indicator of impact. While objective quantitative data can be achieved through pre- and post-intervention methods, they may not fully capture the richness of the transformation experienced. Therefore, qualitative narrative accounts are essential to offer insights into success.

Service evaluations present an opportunity to demonstrate objective and subjective transformation, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of findings. The subjective and temporal nature of definitions here make this problematic for a service to track longitudinally after they have ceased work with a participant, and without additional input from a deliberate evaluation of the service, or from other services working with those individuals. The focus of evaluations has traditionally been on those who have caused harm in terms of recidivism and the challenges of measuring impact in this context are extensive (Piggott & Wood, 2018; Suzuki, 2023). Impact for those who have been harmed is a potential avenue that needs to be explored further within the context of these findings.

5. Discussion

Analysis of practitioner responses from a range of backgrounds (Table 1) highlights the subjectivity of success and the complex interplay between restorative justice and traditional criminal justice systems (Doak & O’Mahony, 2018; Marder et al., 2023). Themes within practitioner definitions of effectiveness (achieving objectives) and impact (extents of effects) are distinct from one another and in that sense align with OECD definitions (OECD, 2021), but many sub-themes are fundamentally connected highlighting the complexity of working with stakeholders that requires a relational lens (Llewellyn, 2021).

Table 3: Summary of definitions from thematic analysis of data

Efficiency	Effectiveness	Impact
1. Practice	1. Process	1. Subjective
2. Cost	2. Outcomes	2. Objective
3. Conceptual rejection		

Practitioner criteria for restorative justice effectiveness incorporate both process and outcome definitions of restorative justice when considering success (Anderson et al., 2025; Presser & Van Voorhis, 2002). Process criteria are defined in relation to the embodiment of restorative justice values and principles, and the extent to which these are delivered in practice, which reflects recent research that promotes measuring restorative justice on these criteria (Olson & Sarver, 2022), and supports the idea that values lead to outcomes that meet the needs of participants and enable their personal transformation (Hopkins, 2004, 2009). Outcomes criteria included personal transformation and the meeting of individual needs. Impact criteria outlined approaches to measuring outcomes using objective and subjective measures, with subjective impact primarily defined by the invested stakeholders and included an emotive and felt component for the individual.

5.1 Conceptual interplay

Opinions varied on whether restorative justice effectiveness lies in process delivery or outcome achievement, reflecting the purist/maximalist debate (McCold, 2000). While process completion was not a prerequisite for success, practice quality was crucial for 82 per cent of respondents in achieving efficiency. Crude equations have been evidenced in restorative justice (Presser & Van Voorhis, 2002), of which satisfaction and practice quality are an example. This must be expanded, as the subjective nature of ‘transformation’ and ‘needs’, identified in this thematic analysis, underscores the importance of clearly defined pre- and post-process measures for feedback, facilitating a nuanced assessment of impact. Feedback mechanisms must transcend the needs of the dominant criminal justice system (Llewellyn et al., 2013) whilst continuing to include them due to realities of institutionalised practice.

Process effectiveness, practitioner behaviour, and outcomes like transformation are interconnected and may affect amounts of subjective and objective impact. Whilst practice frameworks exist (Kirkwood, 2022), the ability of an individual to fulfil these is generally not addressed in literature. The relationship between practitioner skill and positive outcomes suggested here remains underexplored, highlighting a research gap that warrants further investigation. The role of professionalisation, as outlined by Braithwaite (2002) and Gavrielides (2015), underscores the need for standardised training and supervision to ensure the quality and effectiveness of restorative justice services. Ultimately, the pursuit of quality practice must align with the overarching goal of facilitating transformation and meeting individual needs within restorative processes.

Participants focused on individual needs over service metrics, highlighting participant impact over reinforcing institutionalised metrics around costs, recidivism and service satisfaction. While distinct from systemic and programmatic approaches to transformation outlined by Olson and Sarver (2022), this framework could directly apply to personal experiences of overcoming oppression, marginalisation, bias and racism resulting from unequal power structures.

Measuring transformation requires comprehensive recording. Objective measures include elements of transformation, such as change, difference and positive movement that could be observed and measured. Findings suggest connectivity between these concepts, have implications for institutionalisation and evaluation, and offer opportunities for measurement and encouragement of success when leveraged. Transformation goes beyond criminal justice system metrics (recidivism) and measures that seek to justify the institutionalisation of an alternative approach to a punitive system (satisfaction) to meet the relational needs of stakeholders (Doak & O'Mahony, 2018; Shapland et al., 2011).

Further research is needed on the relationship between needs, transformation and practice quality. Standardising definitions, measurement timing and success interpretation is essential. Addressing subjectivity concerns (Presser & Van Voorhis, 2002) requires clear contextual definitions to improve accuracy and ensure quantitative evaluation reliability if used in a larger dataset. Success indicators may vary from immediate outcomes before, during and after a process, to sustained effects, reflecting the diversity of stakeholder perspectives and influences.

5.2 The balancing act of institutionalisation

Despite most respondents (87.14 per cent, n=61) working in the institutionalised context of England and Wales, a diverse range of perspectives emerged, revealing multiple themes across the concepts of effectiveness, efficiency and impact. Furthermore, responses and themes identified reflect the subjectivity of success in restorative justice (Doak & O'Mahony, 2018) and support previous literature concerning how practitioners take a nuanced approach towards institutionalisation in the context of their practice (Butler et al., 2022), understanding the position restorative justice finds itself in as a relational approach positioned in the context of a punitive managerialist system (Pali & Maglione, 2021). A spectrum of views emerges that sit between purist and maximalist approaches (McCold, 1998), some aligning in response with organisational metrics such as process outputs, whilst many highlight outcomes and impact in

the form of personal transformation as a potential metric that is currently not captured by organisations (Fisk, 2023) but could indicate success if evidenced.

This nuanced approach is most acutely observed within definitions of efficiency, often synonymous with cost-effectiveness, which occupies a prominent place in restorative justice success discourse (Grimsey Jones et al., 2023; Shapland et al., 2008; Sherman et al., 2015; Strang et al., 2013), mirroring the traditional criminal justice system focus on managerial and financial metrics (Jones & Newburn, 2009; McEwan, 2011; Pali & Maglione, 2021). 10 per cent (n=7) directly addressed cost as an efficiency measure whilst 10 per cent (n=7) rejected efficiency in relation to restorative justice, with the remainder focused on the importance of nuanced contextual practice grounded in restorative values as key to efficiency. This suggests resistance to institutionalisation via the commodification of restorative practices as product services (Daly, 2016) applied within the context of a managerialist criminal justice system, reflecting tensions between restorative justice and managerialist ideologies (Pali & Maglione, 2021). The question arises whether the pursuit of professionalisation should align with managerialist principles or if alternative methods of gauging success, as suggested in existing literature, could provide more meaningful alternatives (Doak & O'Mahony, 2018; Llewelyn et al., 2013).

This highlights an interesting tension around efficiency and institutionalisation in terms of standardisation that can adhere to restorative values and principles within the context of dominant systems, without overshadowing the individual needs of participants. Practice standards promoted by agencies such as the RJC (2020b) and the EFRJ (2021) can contribute towards maintaining and improving standards of practice and service delivery, in accordance with restorative values, to enhance efficiency and in turn effectiveness in process definitions that can demonstrate impact. Although most respondents identified practice in relation to efficiency, standardisation is complicated by individual differences in practitioner skill and timely service delivery for unique service users. Furthermore, the system must value the type of impact that can be achieved. For example, recidivism, a key metric for institutionalised criminal justice systems, did not emerge as a theme, despite it being a key area of success that is attributed to restorative justice from service evaluations and empirical trials (Sherman et al., 2015; Strang et al., 2013).

However, transformation in terms of change, movement and marked difference that can be felt or observed and measured externally can include recidivism. Survey responses were frequently participant neutral and generalised outcomes for any stakeholder. The focus of evaluations has traditionally been primarily, though not exclusively, on those who have harmed

in terms of recidivism, and the challenges of measuring impact in this context are extensive (Piggott & Wood, 2018; Suzuki, 2023). The finding that impact, in the form of transformation, is not defined as being exclusively for any single stakeholder, suggests a further potential avenue that needs to be explored, perhaps in a relational context, rather than a narrow focus on a single stakeholder which is currently enacted in terms of only reporting data about victims to the UK Ministry of Justice (Fisk, 2023).

6. Conclusion

Institutionalisation of restorative justice is not linear, with local devolution and RJC funding cuts suggesting a potential regression, despite APPG-RJ efforts. National ambivalence persists, seen through a lack of oversight and standardisation (Fisk, 2023), yet practitioners value evaluation for its promotional potential, even when success metrics diverge from managerial processes. Practitioner experience, as demonstrated here, can and should inform future practice as this aligns with many restorative values.

Analysing practitioner-defined effectiveness, efficiency and impact reveals approaches bridging purism and maximalism within institutionalised settings. Subjectivity necessitates diverse evaluation methods, combining quantitative and qualitative data. This enhances awareness, funding and policy influence. While evaluations often combine evidence streams (Hamad et al., 2020), cost and expertise barriers exist (Hamad et al., 2020; Shapland et al., 2011). Contract negotiations should include funding for robust evaluation. National standardisation of definitions and data collection, potentially facilitated by a funded RJC, would benefit the sector (Hobson et al., 2023).

6.1 Additional approaches and metrics

Recommendations must consider diverse national contexts with unique subjective, cultural and structural contexts (Hobson & Payne, 2022) and stakeholder perspectives. While restorativeness is key (Olson & Sarver, 2022), additional metrics are needed until systemic change within criminal justice systems and society more generally occurs (Llewellyn, 2021). To achieve a comprehensive understanding of success, the following approaches to evidencing success should be integrated into service recording and monitoring processes to support evaluation:

- Practice sub-themes: Incorporate quantitative and qualitative data on service quality, practitioner skills and professional reliability, participant focus during processes, time

management that reflects case context, risk management and process barrier mitigation into participant feedback (Table 2).

- Defined subjective and objective measures: Use pre- and post-intervention measures for personal objectives, transformational outcomes and distance travelled. Furthermore, alignment with Kirkwood's (2022) practice framework, including moral repair, shame and trauma response, dialogue facilitation, reparation, rehabilitation, desistance and recovery.
- Co-created case studies: Combine longitudinal qualitative transformation narratives that capture participant collaboration and process engagement with stakeholders alongside traditional process and outcome quantitative data.
- Restorative index: Implement Olson & Sarver's (2022) restorative index to understand service context when applying any of the above metrics.

Further research is needed on the relationship between practice quality and success, considering organisational and staffing variations. Given the identified connections between themes and sub-themes, standardised metrics to address practice quality to measure and improve efficiency to potentially generate higher levels of impact for the participants should be explored explicitly (Table 2). Variations in management and practitioner perspectives require explicit research. Data purpose should be explored, as stakeholders prioritise evidence differently based on their roles, experiences, interests, beliefs and values.

6.2 Study limitations

This thematic analysis treated all survey responses equally, without differentiating by job role. While initial coding revealed no clear correlation between response type and role, future research should explore this further. Practitioners' nuanced understanding of institutionalised settings (Butler et al., 2022) was evident. However, responses hinted at variations in success definitions and data purpose, potentially reflecting different stakeholder perspectives at an institutional level that are explored in further research (Fisk, in review). Though efficiency was rejected by a small percentage, the roles of these individuals were diverse, incorporating academics, practitioners, and managers, and those with more than one position. The subjectivity of success and the lack of response consistency suggest a need for research that explicitly distinguishes between practitioners with and without managerial responsibilities. Semi-structured interviews would be beneficial for a more in-depth analysis.

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