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From Welfare Values to Digital Governance: Developing an Inclusive Digital Strategy in Swedish Corrections

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Abstract

Digital transformation is reshaping correctional systems worldwide, yet limited knowledge exists about how inclusive digital strategies are developed in practice within correctional contexts. This article examines the development of a national digital strategy in Swedish correctional agencies, an initiative explicitly grounded in Nordic welfare-state principles such as normality, proportionality, rehabilitation, and social inclusion. Drawing on multi-grounded action research (MGAR), the study combines two modes of inquiry. Process A followed the practical development of the strategy during 2018–2019, generating empirical material through stakeholder engagement, co-design activities, and the development of strategic representations. Process B involved a subsequent dialectical inquiry in which the strategy development process was reinterpreted through theoretical and analytical lenses to address broader research questions concerning digital governance and correctional transformation. The dialectical inquiry identified five interconnected dimensions of strategy development: welfare values as a normative anchor, the client path as an integrative anchor, "Charlie" as an illustrative anchor, social continuity as a guiding principle for digital inclusion, and legitimacy-building through participation and transparency. Together, these dimensions demonstrate how welfare-oriented values were translated into digital governance arrangements and socio-technical design choices. Rather than offering a model for replication, the Swedish case provides analytically transferable insights into how correctional digital transformation can be aligned with rehabilitation, participation, dignity, and public value within welfare-oriented governance contexts.

Keywords

digital transformation; correctional systems; multi-grounded action research; social inclusion; welfare state

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become a cornerstone of public-sector modernisation across policy domains, including correctional services. Digital resources now permeate everyday life and increasingly mediate social, economic, and civic interactions. In Sweden, the Swedish Correctional Agency (SCA) pioneered the development of a national digital strategy explicitly rooted in welfare-state principles (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2006). The ambition was to mirror the widespread societal reach of digital resources and ensure that justice-involved individuals are not excluded from forms of digital participation that are taken for granted in contemporary society.

This article demonstrates how the Swedish correctional strategy emphasises rehabilitation, reintegration, and respect for human dignity as its core pillars. Central to this orientation is the principle of normality: The idea that life in prison should resemble life in the community as closely as possible, with deprivation limited to the loss of liberty itself (Swedish Prison Act, 2010, henceforth identified as SFS 2010:610; see also Järveläinen, 2024). This approach not only promotes humane conditions of confinement but also supports the development of skills, social relationships, and personal capacities necessary for successful reintegration (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). Nordic countries like Sweden are often presented as an alternative correctional model in which rehabilitation is framed as both a social good and a condition for public safety. However, some scholars caution against idealising their penal systems and highlight continuing tensions between welfare and control (Barker, 2013; Scharff Smith & Ugelvik, 2017). Recent comparative research suggests that Nordic prison systems continue to differ in important ways from more punitive systems, while also highlighting variation and ongoing challenges within these contexts (Crewe et al., 2023). Consistent with this perspective, the present study does not assume that welfare-oriented principles are always realised in practice. Instead, it examines how such principles informed the development of a digital strategy within the SCA.

Demographic and social changes in Sweden, including an ageing population, immigration, and increasing prison overcrowding, have intensified the need for digital transformation. At the same time, digital exclusion remains a growing concern, particularly for already marginalised groups. In response, the Swedish government has identified digital services as essential to sustaining the welfare-state model, including within correctional services (Government Offices of Sweden, 2025). This makes the Swedish correctional strategy a particularly relevant case for examining how welfare-state values are translated into digital governance. The Nordic welfare state has long relied on high levels of institutional trust, which also shapes the legitimacy of digital transformation initiatives (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2006).

This article contributes empirical insights into how welfare-state values are translated into digital governance through the development of a correctional digital strategy. Drawing on a multi-grounded action research (MGAR) approach, it demonstrates how participatory and iterative research approaches can support strategy development in complex public-sector settings. In doing so, the article advances a theoretical link between techno-social justice and correctional governance, highlighting how digital strategies can help prepare the groundwork for rehabilitation, participation, and inclusion.

Despite growing interest in digital transformation within corrections, we still know relatively little about how such strategies are developed in practice, what institutional tensions they entail, and how welfare-oriented

principles are translated into digital governance arrangements. This raises important questions about policy design, organisational change, and the conditions under which digital transformation can support rather than undermine social inclusion within coercive institutions.

This article therefore asks:

1. How was the Swedish correctional digital strategy developed, and how were welfare-state values translated into design choices?
2. What transferable insights does the Swedish case offer to other correctional systems seeking to pursue inclusive digital transformation?

By analysing the strategy development process through the MGAR approach, the article contributes to debates on digital governance, techno-social justice, and social inclusion in correctional contexts.

2. Knowledge Base: Digital Transformation in Corrections

This article uses the term "correctional system" to emphasise the rehabilitative and reintegrative dimensions of state responses to crime, encompassing both custodial and community-based sanctions. The term also reflects the official English designation of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. Swedish organisations, legislation, and policy documents are cited in their original language, with English translations provided in brackets where appropriate. The Nordic welfare model refers to the universalistic and rights-based social-policy framework characteristic of Nordic countries (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2006). Together, these concepts provide a foundation for understanding digital transformation as a reconfiguration of institutional practices and state–citizen relations rather than simply the introduction of new technologies.

Recent international guidance emphasises the need to balance innovation, rehabilitation, security, and human rights when introducing digital technologies in correctional settings (Council of Europe, 2024; United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute [UNICRI], 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2026). Scholarship on digital prisons highlights how technologies are increasingly reshaping correctional environments through digital communication systems, virtual visitation, educational platforms, algorithmic decision-support tools, and surveillance infrastructures (Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2020; McKay & Macintosh, 2022). While these developments may support rehabilitation and social inclusion, researchers also caution that digital technologies can extend institutional control, generate new forms of exclusion, and reproduce existing inequalities. Consequently, digital transformation in correctional settings should be understood as a socio-technical and political process rather than a purely technological one.

Drawing on socio-technical traditions within information systems research (Boström & Heinen, 1977; Iivari & Lyytinen, 1999), the article adopts the umbrella term digital resources to encompass the diverse technologies, services, and infrastructures involved in correctional digital transformation. This terminology supports an analysis of how digital technologies are embedded in organisational practice and shape opportunities for participation and inclusion (Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2018).

2.1. Scandinavian Exceptionalism and Nordic Welfare Model

The notion of the welfare-state prison is a historical and political construct rather than a fixed reality (Pratt, 2007). Its implementation has always been contested, uneven across regions, and subject to shifting political priorities. Scharff Smith and Ugelvik (2017) caution against idealising Scandinavian correctional systems in both domestic and international discourse, noting that welfare institutions can mask coercion behind a façade of care. Barker (2013) similarly warns of soft power dynamics, where control becomes subtle, bureaucratised, and normalised through the language of welfare and progress.

At the same time, Nordic correctional systems are widely associated with welfare-oriented principles that emphasise rehabilitation, reintegration, and humane treatment (Pratt & Eriksson, 2011). Nordic prison systems continue to differ in important ways from more punitive jurisdictions, while also highlighting challenges within these Nordic contexts (Crewe et al., 2023). Rather than treating the cases of exceptionalism as an uncontested reality, this article views it as an analytical lens through which to examine how welfare-oriented values are mobilised within correctional digital governance.

Central to this framework is the principle of normality, supporting that incarcerated individuals retain access to the same rights and opportunities as other citizens, including privacy, family contact, and education (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; SFS 2010:610). Proportionality constitutes another key principle, requiring that sanctions be commensurate with the offence while maintaining a rehabilitative orientation. Comparative observations by Hyatt et al. (2021) demonstrate how Nordic prisons operationalise these principles in practice. Their study of staff exchanges between Norway, Sweden, and the United States revealed striking differences in prison cultures, highlighting how Nordic systems offer stronger safeguards against rights erosion, administrative overload, and the dilution of rehabilitative goals.

These welfare-oriented principles have also shaped Sweden's broader digital policy landscape, including longstanding commitments to digital equality and universal access to public services. Yet correctional services have lagged behind other public sectors in digital development, reflecting continuing tensions between security, control, and rehabilitation (Knight & Ross, 2026).

This aligns with public-sector digital maturity frameworks that conceptualise digital transformation as a staged process of organisational capability-building, governance alignment, and cultural change rather than the linear adoption of new technologies (Meijer, 2015; OECD, 2019). While Scandinavian exceptionalism offers a powerful analytical lens, this article adopts an open stance that recognises the importance of contextual adaptation. Sweden's digital correctional strategy can thus be interpreted as a contemporary extension of the Scandinavian correctional welfare model, in which correctional institutions are understood not merely as sites of punishment but as welfare institutions tasked with normalisation and reintegration (Scharff Smith & Ugelvik, 2017).

Recent scholarship on correctional–welfare hybridisation highlights the ambivalence of reform trajectories. Welfare-oriented narratives simultaneously extend support and intensify governance (Halushka & Miller, 2026). Comparative studies further demonstrate that strong welfare-state orientations do not necessarily reduce punitiveness but can coexist with coercive interventions (Nguyen & Starke, 2025). These insights sharpen the analytical lens of this study by foregrounding how digital transformation may reshape power, legitimacy, and responsibility alongside its welfare ambitions (Powell et al., 2018).

2.2. Digital Justice and Correctional Governance

The Swedish correctional strategy provides a useful case through which to examine the concept of techno-social justice in practice. Techno-social justice directs attention to how digital technologies shape opportunities for participation, inclusion, and agency, particularly within institutions that exercise significant power over individuals. In correctional settings, this raises important questions about whether digital technologies support rehabilitation and social inclusion or reinforce exclusion, surveillance, and control (Knight & Ross, 2026; Zuboff, 2019).

In Sweden, welfare-oriented penal principles such as normality, proportionality, and rehabilitation have provided an important normative foundation for debates about digital transformation in corrections. Whether or not such principles are consistently realised in practice, they remain visible within correctional legislation, policy discourse, and strategy development. Recent comparative research highlights both the continuing influence of welfare-oriented penal values and the tensions and variations that exist within Nordic correctional systems (Crewe et al., 2023). Accordingly, this study treats welfare principles as an analytical lens rather than an empirical assumption, examining how they were mobilised during the development of a digital strategy within SCA.

The strategy emerged in response to a growing recognition that correctional services had lagged behind other areas of public-sector digital development. In a society where digital participation is increasingly central to citizenship and access to public services, this raised concerns about digital exclusion among justice-involved individuals. The development of a national digital strategy therefore created an opportunity to examine how welfare-state values were translated into digital governance through processes of organisational change, stakeholder engagement, and socio-technical design.

2.3. Digital Strategies in Public-Sector Organisations

In increasingly digital societies, organisations rely on digital strategies to guide and coordinate digital transformation. Such strategies are commonly understood as mechanisms for aligning technological capabilities with organisational goals and institutional priorities (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1993). In the public sector, digital strategies involve additional considerations related to governance, accountability, and public value creation. They must balance efficiency objectives with broader democratic and citizen-centred goals (Meijer, 2015). Research on digital government highlights the importance of aligning digital initiatives with institutional missions, organisational structures, legacy systems, and stakeholder relationships (OECD, 2019).

Despite growing interest in public-sector digital transformation, relatively little research has examined how digital strategies are developed within correctional organisations. This gap is significant because correctional settings involve distinctive tensions between rehabilitation, security, inclusion, and control. Understanding how such tensions are negotiated during strategy development is therefore critical to explaining how welfare-oriented principles become embedded in digital governance arrangements. Similarly, digital maturity frameworks emphasise that successful transformation depends on organisational capabilities, governance arrangements, leadership commitment, and cultural change rather than the implementation of technology alone (Stuart et al., 2025).

3. Research Design: Two Modes of Inquiry—Practical and Dialectical

The development of the digital strategy was informed by a rigorous research process rooted in pragmatism (Dewey, 1938) and action research (Susman & Evered, 1978), operationalised through the MGAR methodology (Goldkuhl et al., 2020). This approach is consistent with the Scandinavian socio-technical tradition in systems development, which emphasises practice-based inquiry, participatory exploration of organisational change, and the integration of multiple perspectives in the analysis of digital transformation processes. MGAR was particularly well suited to this project, as it combines theoretical rigour with operational relevance in practice-based research settings.

The study adopts a research design that combines practical inquiry with dialectical inquiry to generate analytically grounded insights from the development of a digital strategy in the SCA. Practical inquiry focuses on intervening in real-world organisational settings while simultaneously generating an empirical basis for subsequent knowledge development.

Dialectical inquiry examines how organisational processes unfold through interactions between different perspectives and organisational change processes (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995), while attending to the tensions and contradictions that shape these dynamics (Benson, 1977). In this study, such tensions were explored through dialogue among actors with different professional and disciplinary backgrounds. This dialectical dialogue also functioned as a form of analytical triangulation, strengthening the credibility of the interpretations by systematically confronting and integrating multiple perspectives.

3.1. Overview of the Research Design

The research design consisted of two interconnected processes. Process A concerned the development of the digital strategy through practical inquiry. Process B involved a research-oriented analysis of the strategy development process to derive insights about organising digital transformation in a complex public-sector context. Together, these two processes enabled an empirically grounded analysis of how digital transformation can be organised within the institutional context of a Nordic welfare-state correctional system. The relationship between these processes and their respective outcomes is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Research design: From practical inquiry to insights in strategy development.

Process	Inquiry mode	Timeline	Driver	Role in the study	Research outcome
A	Practical inquiry	2018–2019	The need for a new digital strategy	Development of the digital strategy	Empirical corpus and analytical representations generated through the inquiry
B	Dialectical inquiry	2023–2026	Research questions	Development of research knowledge through MGAR from the strategy development process	Answers to the research questions

Together, these two processes reflect the MGAR principle of combining practical intervention with systematic knowledge generation.

3.2. Process A: Strategy Development as Practical Inquiry

The development of the digital strategy followed a practical inquiry approach consistent with the MGAR framework, consisting of the phase's diagnosis, plan and design, test and intervention, and evaluation. The initiative originated from a formal mandate by the Director General to the Chief Information Officer to develop a strategy guiding the organisation's digital transformation.

The Chief Information Officer appointed a design team consisting of one of the authors, the enterprise architect of the SCA, and a former correctional officer. This composition created a socio-technical perspective combining research-informed analysis, technological architecture expertise, and operational knowledge of correctional practice. The author's background in the Scandinavian tradition of socio-technical systems design further informed the inquiry by emphasising dialogue, organisational modelling, and participatory exploration of digital transformation processes (Bødker et al., 2004). During this period, the design team worked closely with organisational actors and structures within the agency, including a project group and a steering committee that had previously collected substantial material related to digital transformation initiatives.

3.2.1. Diagnosis

During the diagnosis phase, the design team recognised that earlier attempts to formulate a digital strategy had struggled because the organisation lacked a shared organising principle capable of linking digital transformation to the core practices of correctional work, including the experience and needs of its people. Identifying such an anchor therefore became a central objective of the inquiry process.

3.2.2. Design

In the design phase, the design team developed the client path through the correctional system as an analytical anchor. Developing the client path was not a straightforward mapping exercise. Rather, it required iterative abstraction from multiple data sources to construct a system-level representation that could capture the core practices shared across diverse correctional paths. The process drew on five institutional visits, twenty expert interviews, ten management dialogues, five steering-group meetings, and analyses of fifty policy, regulatory, research, and media documents. Through iterative discussion and comparison of these sources, the design team progressively abstracted from local observations to a system-level representation of correctional practices. This analytical process ultimately resulted in the visual client path, which became a central analytical and communicative anchor in the strategy development process.

To strengthen the robustness of the design process, the design team employed methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978), combining insights from interviews, dialogues, and document analysis. Throughout the inquiry, insights from the different perspectives represented in the design team were continuously discussed and integrated. To avoid becoming locked into purely technical solutions, the design team used storytelling as a reflective and generative method (Kendall & Kendall, 2012; Trauth, 2023). Narrative scenarios were developed to illustrate the transformative potential of digital resources in correctional practice, enabling participants to explore future possibilities in a concrete and value-oriented way. One outcome of this process was the development of "Charlie," a fictional client synthesised from the core correctional practices identified through

the inquiry. Charlie served as an analytical and illustrative anchor for exploring how digital resources could support continuity across different stages of the correctional process. These stories functioned as boundary objects that facilitated dialogue between practitioners, strategists, and IT specialists.

3.2.3. Test and Intervention

The inquiry was conducted through sustained engagement with the organisation over eleven months. All members of the design team were employed by the SCA and carried out other assignments within the organisation alongside the strategy work. This embedded position enabled close engagement with organisational practices and provided a unique opportunity to capture how digital transformation was understood and enacted within the organisational culture. It also enabled the continuous testing and refinement of the emerging client path through ongoing dialogue with correctional officers, administrators, policymakers, and justice-involved individuals. These structured consultations generated insights into everyday constraints and opportunities associated with digital implementation.

3.2.4. Evaluation

The strategy evolved through four iterative cycles focusing on the client path, the language of the strategy, future scenarios, and the formulation of strategic goals. Continuous dialogue with the project group and steering committee enabled feedback and refinement throughout the process. After approximately eleven months of iterative development, the evidence-based digital strategy was formally adopted by the Director General.

3.3. Process B: Dialectical Inquiry

While Process A focused on the development of the digital strategy through practical inquiry, Process B focused on generating research knowledge from this intervention. The empirical corpus generated through Process A provided the basis for analysis, while dialectical inquiry and multi-grounding guided the interpretation of how different perspectives, institutional conditions, and organisational practices shaped the organisation of digital transformation. Multi-grounding was achieved through the iterative integration of empirical material, analytical dialogue, and relevant theoretical perspectives. The analysis was conducted in relation to the research questions and aimed to identify patterns and mechanisms that could inform broader insights about organising digital transformation in correctional systems.

3.3.1. Positionality and Reflexivity

At the time of strategy development, one of the authors was employed by the SCA as an innovation expert while also holding an adjunct lecturer position at a university. The subsequent analysis was conducted four years after the strategy had been formally adopted (Table 1), providing temporal distance from the intervention and opportunities for critical reflection. The analysis was undertaken through a dialectical collaboration between the insider researcher and a second researcher with expertise in correctional sociology. This position enabled a pracademic role, combining practical engagement in organisational development with research-oriented analysis (Posner, 2009; Van de Ven, 2007). While the insider perspective provided detailed knowledge of organisational processes and decision-making, the external

researcher contributed analytical distance and critical challenge. The resulting dialogue enabled interpretations to be continuously questioned, refined, and re-examined throughout the analytical process. This collaboration created a dialogue between an insider perspective rooted in the practical inquiry and an external perspective grounded in correctional sociology, providing opportunities for critical reflection and analytical challenge.

This collaboration also served a reflexive function. The insider perspective provided detailed knowledge of the strategy development process, while the external perspective challenged taken-for-granted assumptions and introduced alternative interpretations. Through iterative dialogue, interpretations were continuously questioned, refined, and re-examined throughout the analytical process. In addition, the temporal distance between the strategy development process and the subsequent analysis created opportunities to revisit earlier assumptions and reinterpret empirical material, considering later reflections and theoretical developments.

3.3.2. Interpretive Frameworks

The analysis was informed by the theoretical perspectives and prior research presented in Section 2. In particular, the Nordic welfare model, international corrections research, and public-sector digital transformation literature provided interpretive lenses for understanding the institutional context of the SCA and the organisation of digital transformation within correctional systems. One important outcome of the analytical process was the introduction of the Nordic welfare model as a framework for interpreting the empirical material and situating the Swedish correctional context within a broader institutional setting (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

3.3.3. Perspective Analysis

The analysis was conducted as a dialectical inquiry, focusing on how the strategy development process unfolded through interactions between different perspectives and institutional conditions (Benson, 1977; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). This collaboration created a productive dialogue between an insider perspective rooted in the practical inquiry and an external research perspective grounded in corrections sociology. Through iterative discussions and reinterpretations of the empirical material, patterns and mechanisms shaping the organisation of digital transformation were identified.

3.3.4. Analytical Process

The analytical process involved iterative examination of the empirical corpus generated through Process A (Table 1). An initial step focused on unpacking the methods, analytical anchors, and representations used during the strategy development process, including the client path, narrative scenarios, and other artefacts that had shaped the inquiry.

Through this process, the analysis progressively identified a series of interconnected anchors. Welfare-state values were interpreted as a normative anchor providing direction for digital transformation. The client path emerged as an integrative anchor capable of integrating correctional practices across the system. Building on this foundation, Charlie was interpreted as an illustrative anchor that linked welfare values, correctional practices, and digital resources. These analytical interpretations subsequently informed the insights presented in the discussion section.

Subsequent analysis focused on identifying patterns, mechanisms, and organising principles that could explain how the strategy emerged and gained legitimacy within the organisational context. Through iterative dialogue, empirical observations were continuously compared with relevant theoretical perspectives, enabling theoretical matching and the refinement of emerging interpretations.

Attention was given to how different analytical representations, such as the client path and Charlie, functioned as analytical anchors. These linked operational practices, digital resources, and strategic objectives. Through successive reinterpretations of the empirical material, the analysis moved from descriptions of the strategy development process towards broader insights concerning the organisation of digital transformation in correctional systems.

4. Empirical Findings: Developing a Welfare-Oriented Digital Strategy

The findings suggest progression from values to action through a series of interconnected anchors. These anchors were not predefined in the strategy development process but emerged through the subsequent dialectical analysis conducted in Process B. Welfare-state values functioned as a normative anchor, providing direction and legitimacy for digital transformation. The client path emerged as an integrative anchor, enabling the abstraction and integration of core correctional practices across the system. Building on this foundation, Charlie functioned as an illustrative anchor, making the strategy concrete and communicable by linking welfare values, correctional practices, and digital resources. Together, these anchors enabled digital transformation to be understood as a means of sustaining social continuity and supporting rehabilitation. The strategy ultimately gained legitimacy through participation, dialogue, and multi-grounding across organisational perspectives.

4.1. Welfare Values as a Normative Anchor

Our analysis confirms that welfarism constituted the normative backbone of the strategy. The principles of proportionality and normality—associated with Scandinavian exceptionalism—formed the normative foundation of Sweden's correctional digital strategy. Together, these principles emphasise humane treatment and position incarceration as a rehabilitative rather than purely punitive intervention.

By integrating these principles into its digital strategy, the SCA sought to uphold the rights of justice-involved individuals while actively supporting their reintegration into society. A concrete expression of this orientation is found in the SCA's long-standing "Better Out" vision (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2007), which encapsulates the ambition that individuals should leave the correctional system better equipped for social participation than when they entered. The strategy was further anchored in Sweden's legal and welfare frameworks. The Swedish Prison Act (SFS 2010:610) provided a robust juridical foundation for integrating digital resources into correctional practice, ensuring alignment with broader welfare-state commitments to equality, dignity, and proportionality. This legal anchoring reinforced the strategy's rehabilitative orientation and highlighted the importance of maintaining humane correctional practices in an increasingly digital society.

4.2. The Client Path as an Integrative Anchor

A central finding concerns the development of the client path as an integrative framework for digital transformation. During the inquiry, the design team recognised that earlier attempts to develop a digital strategy had struggled because SCA lacked a shared framework capable of linking digital transformation to the core practices of correctional work. While formal goals and organisational structures provided important points of reference, they did not adequately capture how correctional work unfolded across different settings and stages of the correctional process.

The analysis revealed that correctional work was enacted through interconnected practices spanning custody, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Consequently, developing the client path became a key analytical task. This was not a straightforward mapping exercise but an iterative process of abstraction and synthesis across multiple data sources and stakeholder perspectives.

Empirical material from institutional visits, interviews, management dialogues, steering-group discussions, and documentary sources was continuously interpreted and compared. Through successive iterations, the design team moved from fragmented observations and local perspectives towards a shared system-level representation of correctional practices. The resulting client path provided a shared representation of the correctional process, linking welfare values, correctional practices, and digital transformation initiatives. As an integrative anchor, it enabled strategic alignment across organisational boundaries and guided the subsequent strategy development.

4.3. Charlie as an Illustrative Anchor

A third finding concerns the role of Charlie, the fictional client developed as a narrative representation of the correctional process. While the client path provided an integrative anchor for understanding correctional practices at the organisational level across the correctional system, Charlie functioned as an illustrative anchor that made these practices tangible from the perspective of an individual moving through the system. Charlie was developed to explore how digital resources could support individuals throughout the client path. Charlie was not intended to represent a specific individual. Rather, he was synthesised from the core correctional practices identified through the inquiry and served as a narrative scenario through which future possibilities could be explored. By following Charlie through different stages of the correctional process, the design team was able to examine how digital resources might support education, therapeutic interventions, family contact, and preparation for reintegration into society. In summary, this approach was driven by Charlie's needs and his experiences of the justice system.

Once the core correctional practices had been identified and synthesised, the design team explored how these practices might be supported through digital resources. This work resulted in a series of narrative scenarios depicting both justice-involved individuals and correctional staff in different situations, such as education, treatment, healthcare, transportation planning, and needs and risk assessment work.

Importantly, Charlie functioned as an illustrative anchor linking welfare values, correctional practices, and digital resources. Through this representation, abstract principles such as normality, proportionality, and rehabilitation could be translated into digital possibilities. Charlie therefore enabled participants to move

beyond discussions of technology itself and instead focus on how digital resources could contribute to correctional goals and individual outcomes. These scenarios enabled DT to explore how digital resources could support correctional practices across organisational boundaries and throughout the correctional process, while also examining the strategic implications of a needs-based digitally enabled correctional system. The narrative also served an important communicative function. Charlie facilitated dialogue across professional and organisational boundaries by providing a shared reference point for practitioners, managers, strategists, and technical specialists. In this way, Charlie functioned both as an analytical anchor and as a communicative resource that supported collective sensemaking throughout the strategy development process.

4.4. Digital Transformation as Social Continuity

The strategy reflected an explicitly human-centred approach to digital transformation. Rather than prioritising surveillance, control, or administrative efficiency, the SCA focused on digital resources that could support rehabilitation, inclusion, and reintegration.

A central empirical finding concerns how digital transformation was framed as a means of sustaining social continuity between correctional settings and everyday life and avoiding fragmentation through imprisonment. In a society where digital participation is increasingly essential for full citizenship, the SCA recognised that exclusion from digital environments risks compounding existing marginalisation. The strategy, therefore, aimed to equip justice-involved individuals with the digital competencies required for everyday life beyond prison.

Importantly, digital transformation also targeted correctional staff. Training programmes were developed to ensure competence in new digital systems, fostering a shared digital culture across organisational roles. This dual focus on clients and staff contributed to organisational cohesion and mutual understanding, and the development of a shared digital culture across the correctional system. In the Swedish context—where digital access is widely regarded as a civic right—the inclusion of incarcerated individuals in digital transformation was framed as a moral and political responsibility. Preparing individuals for participation in a digitised society was thus positioned as a form of public value creation.

A major challenge for the design team was addressing siloed legacy systems that hindered coordination and reinforced fragmented client management. These systems constrained both operational effectiveness and holistic care. The DT therefore pursued integrated digital resources that enabled information sharing across organisational boundaries and professional roles, supporting continuity in rehabilitation processes.

4.5. Building Legitimacy Through Participation and Multi-Grounding

A final finding concerns how legitimacy was built throughout the strategy development process. Rather than relying solely on formal authority, the design team continuously engaged organisational actors through dialogue, participation, and iterative feedback. This enabled the strategy to be progressively refined while fostering shared ownership across different parts of the organisation.

A transparent and participatory process characterised strategy development. Communication specialists supported the production of accessible strategy documents, helping to demystify technical content and

make the strategy understandable to diverse stakeholder groups. Iterative feedback loops involving the project group, steering committee, and operational representatives reinforced trust in both the process and the emerging strategy.

Legitimacy was further strengthened through multi-grounding, where empirical observations, organisational perspectives, and relevant knowledge sources were continuously integrated throughout the inquiry. This evidence-based approach enabled the strategy to gain credibility across professional and organisational boundaries and contributed to its eventual adoption by the Director General.

The findings suggest that digital transformation became actionable through a series of increasingly concrete representations. Welfare-state values functioned as a normative anchor, the client path as an integrative anchor, and Charlie as an illustrative anchor. Together, these representations enabled participants to move from abstract principles to coordinated action and concrete digital possibilities. Table 2 summarises the analytical functions of these representations. These representations emerged during the inquiry but were identified through the subsequent dialectical analysis conducted in Process B.

Table 2. Analytical anchors identified through the inquiry.

Anchor type	Representation	Function in the inquiry	Contribution to strategy development
Normative anchor	Welfare-state values	Provided direction, legitimacy, and evaluative criteria for digital transformation	Anchored the strategy in rehabilitation, proportionality, and normality
Integrative anchor	Client path	Integrated correctional practices, stakeholder perspectives, and digital possibilities into a shared representation	Enabled strategic alignment across organisational boundaries
Illustrative anchor	Charlie	Made abstract principles tangible through narrative scenarios and future-oriented exploration	Facilitated communication, collective sensemaking, and exploration of digital possibilities

5. Discussion: Translating Welfare Values Into Digital Governance

This study examined how welfare-state values were translated into the development of a national digital strategy within the SCA. Rather than evaluating implementation outcomes, the analysis focused on the strategy development process and the negotiation of competing priorities concerning rehabilitation, security, participation, and organisational change. Through the combination of practical inquiry and dialectical interpretation, the study provides insight into how welfare-oriented principles became embedded within emerging forms of digital governance.

The findings illuminate how welfare-oriented values were translated into strategic and organisational choices through an iterative process involving researchers, practitioners, and organisational stakeholders, consistent with practice-based and engaged approaches to organisational research (Goldkuhl et al., 2020; Van de Ven, 2007).

By positioning rehabilitation within a broader social contract, consistent with Nordic welfare philosophies (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2006; Scharff Smith & Ugelvik, 2017), the Swedish strategy illustrates how correctional digital transformation can contribute to collective wellbeing as well as individual reintegration. More broadly, the findings suggest that digital transformation in corrections is best understood as a process of institutional redesign rather than technological modernisation alone. The strategy reflects welfare traditions associated with proportionality, normality, and trust-based governance while revealing enduring tensions between rehabilitation and control, and innovation and risk management (Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2020; Pratt, 2007). Through dialectical interpretation, these tensions can be understood as ongoing negotiations through which governance values are translated, contested, and stabilised during organisational change (Benson, 1977; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995), reinforcing broader arguments that digital transformation is fundamentally socio-institutional in nature (Bannister & Connolly, 2011).

5.1. Techno-Social Justice and the Swedish Strategy

The Swedish case illustrates how techno-social justice can be translated into correctional digital strategy. Rather than treating digital transformation primarily as a matter of efficiency, the strategy framed digital resources as mechanisms for supporting education, therapeutic engagement, social participation, and reintegration. In this way, inclusion, dignity, and participation became embedded in the design of digital governance arrangements. At the same time, the findings highlight that welfare-oriented ambitions do not eliminate tensions between support and control, a theme that becomes particularly visible when digital infrastructures are introduced into correctional settings (Halushka & Miller, 2026; Nguyen & Starke, 2025).

5.2. Resisting Surveillance Logics

The Swedish approach also illustrates how correctional digital strategies can resist the risks identified by Zuboff in her critique of surveillance capitalism. She warns of "instrumentarian power" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 19), whereby digital resources predict and modify behaviour, potentially eroding autonomy and democratic accountability. In contrast, the Swedish strategy was guided by welfare-oriented principles intended to support rehabilitation, participation, and reintegration. Rather than treating individuals primarily as risks to be managed, the strategy sought to position them as participants in social and civic life whose rehabilitation carries broader social value. This reflects broader concerns about how digital governance can reconfigure relations between government, power, and citizenship (Henman, 2010).

At the same time, welfare-oriented intentions do not eliminate the possibility of unintended consequences. Digital infrastructures designed to support rehabilitation may also expand opportunities for monitoring, categorisation, and behavioural management. As critiques of welfare governance have long argued, support and control frequently coexist within the same institutional arrangements (Barker, 2013; Halushka & Miller, 2026). The significance of the Swedish case therefore lies not in demonstrating a complete escape from these tensions, but in making them visible within the strategy development process itself.

From a public value perspective, the strategy illustrates how digital transformation can be oriented towards inclusion, participation, accountability, and long-term social outcomes rather than short-term efficiency gains (Meijer, 2015). However, the analysis also highlights the need for continued scrutiny of how digital infrastructures reshape power relations, institutional oversight, and opportunities for participation.

The Swedish case therefore illustrates an ongoing negotiation between welfare ambitions and governance imperatives rather than a definitive resolution of these tensions.

5.3. Insights: Implications and Recommendations

Building on the empirical analysis, the study generates a set of analytically derived insights for correctional digital transformation. These insights emerged through the dialectical interpretation of the strategy development process and highlight recurring governance tensions that are likely to arise when digital transformation is pursued within correctional systems. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, they identify considerations that may support more inclusive and welfare-oriented approaches to digital transformation.

First, digital transformation must avoid becoming symbolic participation, where consultation creates an appearance of involvement without materially influencing decisions or resource allocation. Meaningful participation requires stakeholder contributions to shape both strategic priorities and implementation choices. Without sustained institutional commitment, participatory initiatives risk remaining rhetorical, generating disillusionment and weakening trust (Bjørkquist & Hansen, 2022). Unresolved tensions between managerial control and professional judgment may further undermine implementation (Hofinger & Pflegerl, 2024).

Second, digital transformation should be understood as a shift in governance logic rather than a technical upgrade. Digital systems reshape agency, accountability, and legitimacy (Powell et al., 2018). From a socio-technical perspective, digital resources are embedded in organisational practices and social relations rather than functioning as isolated technical tools (Boström & Heinen, 1977; Iivari & Lyytinen, 1999). This perspective shifts attention from specific technologies to the ways digital resources are enacted in practice (Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2018) and highlights the importance of embedding techno-social justice through human-centred design (Bødker et al., 2004).

Third, the Swedish case highlights the importance of contextual adaptation. Welfare-state structures, trust relations, and legal frameworks vary across jurisdictions (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2006), and digital ambitions must align with organisational capacity and governance conditions (UNICRI, 2024). Digital transformation is therefore institutionally contingent rather than universally transferable, consistent with research emphasising the importance of organisational capabilities, governance capacity, and institutional readiness (OECD, 2019; Stuart et al., 2025).

Fourth, collaborative and participatory design emerged as an important source of legitimacy. Involving policymakers, practitioners, and affected individuals strengthened the perceived relevance of the strategy and reflected welfare traditions of shared responsibility (Bødker et al., 2004; Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021). However, participation alone does not guarantee meaningful influence or successful implementation.

Fifth, ethical digital transformation requires prioritising human-centred outcomes over efficiency. Digital resources were valued not because they were innovative, but because they supported education, therapeutic engagement, family relationships, and participation in everyday social life, consistent with principles of normality and proportionality (Pratt, 2007). Future strategies should therefore begin with questions of human need and institutional purpose rather than technological capability alone, an orientation reflected in emerging frameworks for ethical digital governance (Council of Europe, 2024; UNICRI, 2024).

Sixth, digital inclusion depends on sustained investments in digital literacy. Unequal access and competencies risk reproducing new forms of marginalisation (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). Training and support are therefore essential to enable meaningful participation and uphold welfare-state commitments to equality (Järveläinen, 2024).

Finally, digital resources may help address structural constraints such as overcrowding through virtual visits and remote rehabilitation. However, such solutions must be designed to support social continuity without reinforcing distance or control (Aebi et al., 2020).

Taken together, these insights suggest that while the Swedish case offers analytically transferable knowledge, its application depends on contextual conditions. The approach is grounded in a high-trust welfare-state setting characterised by strong legal protections, mature digital infrastructures, and sustained political commitment to rehabilitation. Where such conditions are weaker, similar initiatives may produce different outcomes or generate unintended consequences. More broadly, digital transformation carries inherent risks. It may expand monitoring and administrative control, while uneven digital competencies can reproduce new forms of exclusion. These dynamics reinforce the need to approach digital transformation as an ongoing, context-sensitive process of negotiation rather than a model to be adopted wholesale.

6. Conclusion

The Swedish digital correctional strategy represents an important attempt to align welfare-oriented correctional principles with digital transformation. Rather than presenting a model for replication, the case provides an opportunity to examine how rehabilitation, normality, and inclusion can be translated into digital governance within a particular institutional and political context. This article has explored the implications of this process for other jurisdictions pursuing digital transformation in correctional systems.

The findings show that the strategy emerged through an iterative, participatory, and normatively guided process informed by MGAR. Welfare-oriented principles, particularly normality, proportionality, and rehabilitation, were not treated as abstract ideals but translated into concrete socio-technical design choices through cycles of stakeholder engagement, deliberation, testing, and refinement. In this sense, digital transformation was framed not primarily as technological modernisation but as a means of supporting social continuity, participation, and reintegration within an increasingly digital society.

The relevance of these insights extends beyond the Swedish context, although their transferability should not be overstated. Consistent with recent empirical work on Nordic correctional systems (Crewe et al., 2023), the findings point to the continuing influence of welfare-oriented principles while recognising substantial variation across institutional and national contexts. The value of the Swedish case therefore lies less in offering a model for replication than in providing an analytically rich example of how digital transformation can be aligned with rehabilitation, participation, and dignity within a particular welfare-state setting. Applicability remains shaped by contextual factors, including legal protections, institutional trust, organisational maturity, and political commitment to rehabilitation.

Our contribution lies in showing how welfare-oriented principles were negotiated, interpreted, and embedded within digital governance arrangements, rather than demonstrating the effectiveness of those

arrangements in practice. The findings further suggest that digital transformation in corrections remains characterised by enduring tensions between inclusion and control, rehabilitation and risk management, and innovation and accountability. Welfare-oriented intentions do not eliminate the possibility that digital infrastructures may generate new forms of monitoring, exclusion, or administrative control. Consequently, the challenge for correctional systems is not merely to digitise existing practices but to continuously evaluate how digital transformation reshapes participation, accountability, and institutional power.

Rather than presenting Sweden as a model to be adopted wholesale, this article offers an analytically informed account of how welfare-oriented values can shape digital governance within a particular institutional context. The broader significance of the study lies in highlighting that the legitimacy of digital transformation in corrections depends not only on technological innovation but on the continual negotiation of dignity, participation, and justice in increasingly digital forms of governance. As correctional systems become increasingly digitalised, the central challenge is not simply the adoption of digital technologies but the continued negotiation of dignity, participation, and justice within evolving forms of digital governance. In this sense, the Swedish experience should be understood less as a finished model and more as an ongoing provocation—a call to ensure that future digital transformation in corrections serves as a tool for empowerment rather than an instrument of soft control. As Scharff Smith and Ugelvik (2017) remind us, the legitimacy of the welfare prison is never given; it must be continuously earned, enacted, and defended—especially in its digital form.

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Conflict of Interests

The first author's dual role is addressed in Section 3.3.1. The author declares no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen).

Data Availability

The empirical corpus generated during the strategy development process is not publicly available due to confidentiality and organisational sensitivity.

LLMs Disclosure

LLM tools, including ChatGPT (OpenAI) and AI Companion, were used to support language editing, improve readability and consistency, and assist with reference checking and APA formatting. All substantive content, methodological decisions, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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