

USERVOICE

ONLY OFFENDERS CAN STOP RE-OFFENDING

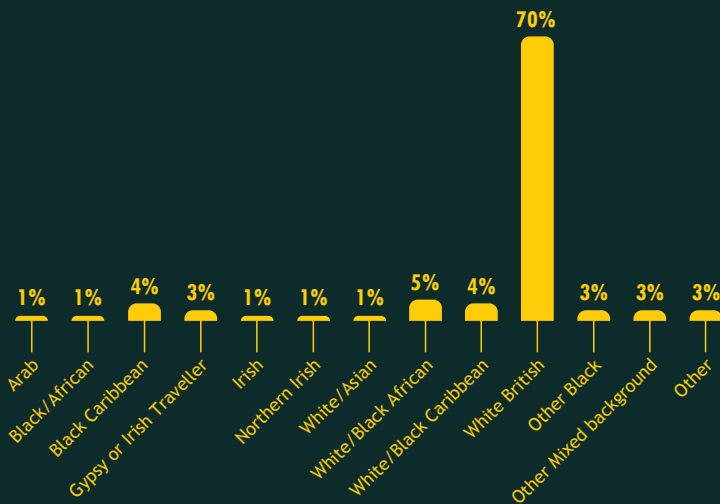
**THE VOICE OF
WOMEN ON
PROBATION
A THEMATIC INSPECTION**

AUGUST 2024

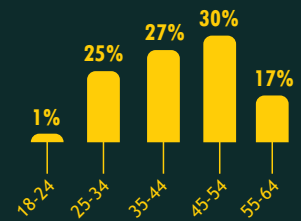
RESEARCH SAMPLE

77 Women on probation had their say via survey responses and/or one-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews.

ETHNICITY



AGE



Yes

31%

No

69%



Yes

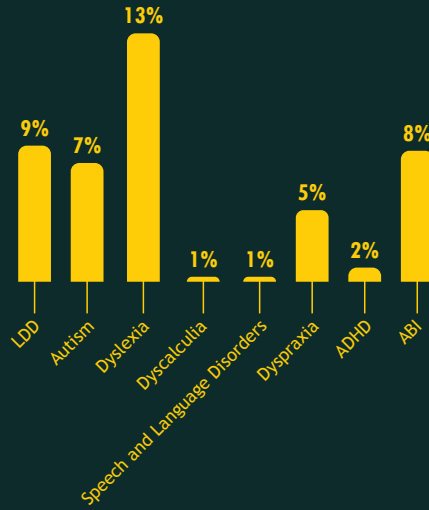
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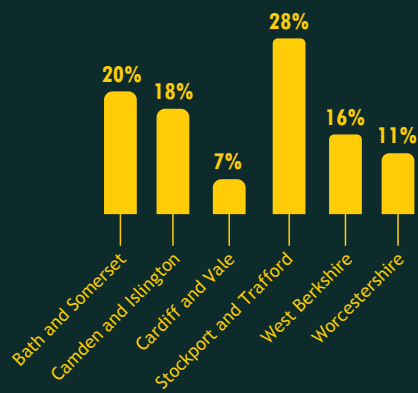
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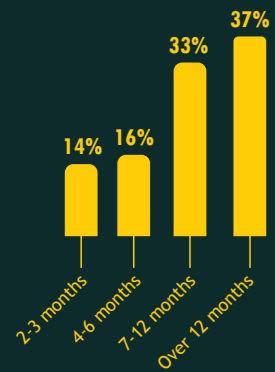
NEURODIVERGENCE



PROBATION DELIVERY UNIT



TIME ON PROBATION



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FOREWORD

This consultation brings forward the voices of women on probation. We hope that by better understanding of the current experience of women on probation, we can provide better support to aid their rehabilitation, and increase desistance.

User Voice is a charity run by lived experience. By involving lived experienced peer researchers in every part of the research process, from designing interview questions and interviewing, to data analysis and report editing, we were able to fully capture the solutions and recommendations suggested by women on probation.

Our engagement found that women's overall probation experience was good. More than half of the surveyed women said they have access to the services they need. Those who did not have access to services they need, often said it was due to their remote location or because of insufficient signposting by probation.

The vast majority had a 'good' or 'excellent' relationship with their probation practitioner. A good practitioner was defined as someone who understood different life situations and went 'above and beyond' in supporting women on probation. This is particularly pertinent as over half of women we engaged with said they had been a victim of abuse.

At User Voice we are a solution focused organisation. These solutions come directly from the women we engaged with.

What came through clearly was that personal relationships are crucial. Women asked for the option for every person on probation to be asked their preference of practitioner's gender.

Those we engaged with said that more remote appointments would help people on probation attend an appointment without having to cancel other commitments that are helping them to re-integrate to society.

Better multi-agency working was also mentioned from our engagement. In the event of a person changing probation practitioner more robust 'caseload sharing' models for practitioners to avoid people having to re-live their traumas.

Many of those we engaged spoke about trauma suffered before and during entering the criminal justice system, they asked for a more robust and mandatory 'trauma informed approach' training for practitioners.

This report is a snapshot of women's experiences on probation. To garner a more comprehensive picture we need to continue to speak to people within the system.

Finally, I would like to thank HM Inspectorate of Probation for seeing the benefits in including lived experience in the process of speaking to service users.

We hope the solutions contained in this consultation will go some way in improving the experience of women on probation.

Brendan Doyle,

Interim Chief Executive Officer, User Voice

ABOUT USER VOICE

User Voice is a nationwide UK charity created and run by people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. Four in five of our staff have experience of the criminal justice system.

We bring about transformation for individuals and institutions by empowering the most marginalised in society – so the system can work for everyone.

Since User Voice was founded in 2009, we have given a voice to over 156,000 people in prison and on probation. We have worked in 1 in 5 UK prisons and three-quarters of probation services. Our prison councils are about change. The councils' democratic process makes sure that all voices can be heard. Focusing on collective challenges and solutions, we can give practitioners and policymakers a route to effective and lasting change.

User Voice has co-produced over 120 peer research projects with over 20,000 participants. Our sector leading research such as Coping with Covid and Neurodiversity in the Criminal Justice Sector give decisions makers feedback and solutions.

Over the past 15 years we have provided a path for over 300 people from the criminal justice system into employment. Former members of User Voice staff have gone on to work for the Ministry of Justice, the NHS, and Civil Service to name a few.

As part of User Voice's relationship HM Inspectorate of Probation, over 2,500 people had their voice heard as part of thirty-four regional inspections of Probation Delivery Units and four thematic inspections over the past year.

This report outlines the voice of women on probation for the inspection titled 'Voice of Women on Probation. A thematic inspection' and is just one part of the full inspection. Therefore, we recommend reading the full report published by HM Inspectorate of Probation that we refer to in this report to get a complete picture.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Despite comprising of approximately half of the total UK population, women offenders are a significant minority in the criminal justice system (CJS). Of those held in custody, only 3.8% are women and women account for only 12.2% of those supervised in the community (MoJ, 2023)¹. Consequently, the criminal justice system is more focused on men, and more used to working with and providing services for men.

Women on probation are amongst the most vulnerable in society, often having experienced domestic abuse and other crimes before entering the system. Women offenders commit less serious, violent, and organised crime, and are more likely to have mental health issues and to suffer from drug addictions. Additionally, women offenders are also more often the main carers for dependent children. (Ibid.)

The causes of offending, as well as offence and re-offence types significantly differ between women and men. For this, and all the above reasons, better provision of services with a 'woman centred approach' is needed in the CJS (Corston, 2007)².

This consultation is part of HM Inspectorate of Probation's 2024 thematic inspection. The inspection in 2016 found that funding for women offenders, especially women's centres and charities, was not sufficient, resulting in inadequate provision of the much needed 'woman centred approach' to services. This report is one branch of that inspection and allows women on probation to have their say.

The overall objective of this consultation was to better understand how gender affects an individual's experience of probation, and using that insight, to create peer-led solutions to the problems women face.

Such solution-based research can be built upon by the Probation Service to improve the experience and rehabilitation of women on probation and in turn, better protect the individuals and the wider society.

Our objectives in this consultation were:

- To understand the experience of women on probation and what support they have (or have not) had both in general and in relation to their gender.
- To understand how women on probation's experience of probation in relation to their gender has changed since the previous inspection in 2016.
- To collate women on probation's views on what probation needs to do to better help women in the criminal justice system.
- To highlight any good practices that could be built upon by the service.

¹ Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022 to 2025. London: Ministry of Justice; 2023.

² Corston J. The Corston Report: A Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System. London: The Home Office; 2007.

APPROACH

PRE-FIELDWORK

- Research materials (Discussion Guide and Survey) were developed with the involvement of an all-female lived experience panel.
- Participant recruitment had two facets:
 - 1) A text message was sent out to all women on probation in each probation area. The text message included a link to our survey.
 - 2) Each probation area provided us a list of women on probation to be contacted for an interview.

FIELDWORK

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted by 4 female lived experience peer researchers across 6 locations:
 - 1) West Berkshire
 - 2) Worcestershire
 - 3) Stockport and Trafford
 - 4) Camden and Islington
 - 5) Cardiff and The Vale
 - 6) Bath and Somerset
- Interviews were conducted remotely over the phone.

DATA ANALYSIS

- Thematic data analysis was completed on all interview and questionnaire responses from the 6 probation regions.
- An analysis session was held with all of the research staff involved on the project and the lived experience panel. The purpose was to identify key themes in the data and areas of focus for the report.

KEY FINDINGS

- **68%** of the women said their overall probation experience was good.
- **47%** of women believe their gender is not a factor in their probation experience, whereas **21%** believe it is a factor.
- **36%** of the women who took part in this inspection live in Approved Premises, most of whom told User Voice they feel safe there.
- **58%** of surveyed women had been victims of abuse and **42%** had been victims of other crimes. **71%** of these women said being a victim of abuse or other crimes, was the reason they ended up in the criminal justice system.
- **65%** of the women had a positive induction experience. Neurodivergent women had a more negative induction experience than neurotypical women.
- **79%** had a 'good' or 'excellent' relationship with their probation practitioner. Good practitioners understood different life situations and went 'above and beyond' in supporting women on probation.
- **58%** of women had their appointments in mixed gender facilities. Those women who did not want to report in mixed gender facilities (30%) reported having felt intimidated, anxious, nervous, and even scared.
- **21%** of the women have been either breached or recalled, mostly because missing of appointments or breaking of restraining orders.
- **63%** of the surveyed women and **42%** of the interviewed women said they have access to the services they need. Those who did not have access to services they need, said it was due to their remote location or because of insufficient signposting by probation.

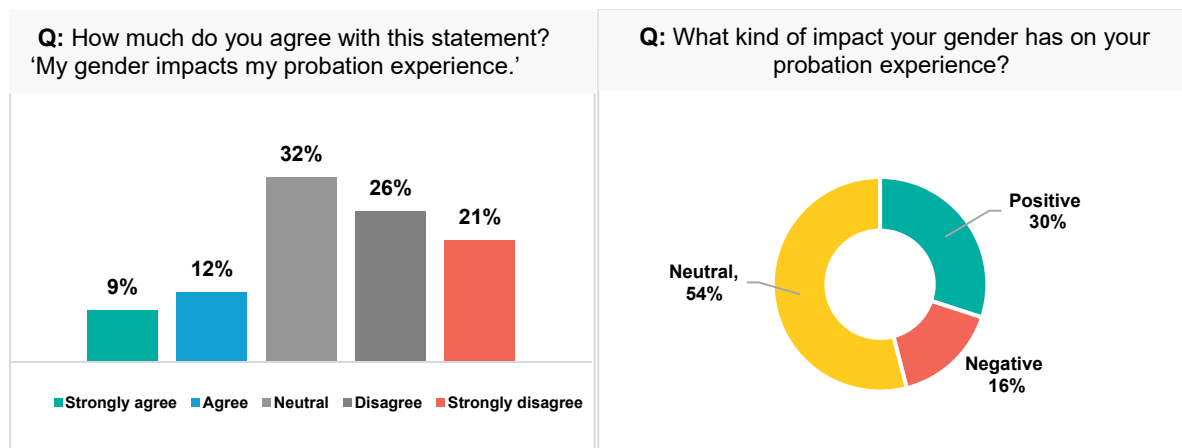
CHAPTER 1: OVERALL PROBATION EXPERIENCE

The role of the Probation Service is to supervise individuals serving community orders and on release from prison while protecting the public. For this consultation, User Voice broke down women's probation experience into six key areas to better understand their experience and how they are being supported in each area. The six areas were:

- 1) pre-sentence experience,
- 2) experience with induction,
- 3) relationship with probation staff,
- 4) experience with their appointments,
- 5) ability to access services,
- 6) to what extent they feel heard by probation.

IS GENDER A FACTOR?

Almost half (47%) of women on probation believe their gender is not a factor in their probation experience. Those who felt gender was not a factor, referred to men they know having the same experience, whereas others felt their gender impacted their arrest but not their probation experience.



Of those women who thought their gender was a factor in their probation experience (21% in total), 16% thought it was a negative factor. Negative experiences included male practitioners' not understanding feminine health issues (e.g., menstruation symptoms and menopause), being treated differently than men, and more easily perceived as 'moaning' when expressing dissatisfaction. Some women felt that probation is designed for men (e.g., risk and need levels) and that as a result many services are not suitable for women.

“Yes, I do [think gender is a factor]. If a man is in Prison or on Probation, they just get straight to the point with them. When it's a woman, they seem to think you're moaning and don't take us seriously.”

30% of women said their gender impacted their probation experience positively. Most of them were women who had experienced abuse and were grateful being able report in all female spaces and to attend female only groups. Other women included those who appreciated the flexibility they were allowed around childcare and pregnancy.

“Definitely [gender impacts probation experience], because I think if I'd had to go to the standard Probation Centre, I don't think I would have wanted to go and I would have breached, so I think being a woman and having a choice to go to a women's centre really helped me to go.”

FURTHER FINDINGS

- Women with over 12-month licenses or community orders, and those who were over 55 years old felt, more than women with shorter orders and younger women, that their gender had a positive impact on their probation experience.
- 28% of the surveyed women were caring after children and/or relatives. Their gendered experience of probation did not differ from those without caring responsibilities.
- Able-bodied women were more likely to disagree that their gender impacted their probation experience (56%) in comparison to those who were disabled (31%). However, both disabled and able-bodied women had same rates of positive and negative probation experiences.

BIGGEST ISSUE IN PROBATION?

The relationship with probation practitioner(s) and appointment times were the most popular answers when we asked women what their 'biggest issue' with probation was. Women specifically spoke about 'double standards' when cancelling appointments, referring to practitioners cancelling appointments without any consequence when they had been punished for it. Other issues included the financial, mental, and/or physical burden of having to travel to PDU's that were located far from them.

"I think there are a lot of double standards. If I'm late I could get breached, if she is it's fine. I have to provide a valid and acceptable reason for needing to reschedule an appointment, but she just does it as and when she needs."

"Not knowing when my appointments are so I'm penalised and then my probation is extended."

23% of the interviewed women were happy with probation and had no issues.

"From the first probation officer I met who wrote the pre-sentence report to my worker [Name], I have felt unjudged, valued, like a person deserving of support and their time has been second to none."

"I have been supported through tough times and given advice for better future."

APPROVED PREMISES

From our engagement, 36% of the women we surveyed and interviewed were living in Approved Premises (AP). Most of them felt safe and supported. Women mentioned feeling safe, peer support, AP staff, and 24-hour support as positives when living in Approved Premises.

"I feel safe and supported here because support is available 24 hours a day and the other girls are great. There are 21 activities a week available and 3 supported meals. I know it's a privilege to be here because I was in one in London years ago that was awful so when they first said I was going into an approved premise I was dreading it!"

"The staff at this one are really good, they've opened doors for me. I feel safe. The girls are the main support here, but the staff do at least try, and like I said, they have opened doors."

"It is safe here. You know you're not allowed to give out the address ... there is no visitors allowed in the building, yeah, it's staffed 24/7 and they get you linked up with services in the town. It is very good."

The most cited negative experience women told us was APs being too far from their support networks.

"It was out of reach though - not near my friends and family. I was a bit isolated. They asked me in prison what my fear was about being released and I said being isolated. It was far, so it was hard to get people to come down and visit. They need to take into consideration that people need to sign in 3 times a day, so it makes you feel isolated."

Another common theme was having to stay in APs for long periods of time and it negatively impacting their mental health. These women felt depressed 'being stuck in there' while seeing other women come and go, as well as having to interact with people they were trying to avoid in order to rehabilitate and move on with their lives.

"The length of time I've been here really drains you ... the different women coming in and out, it drains you in the end."

"They are very substance misuse and recovery focus, and I was not in there for that purpose, so it was not the best place for me to be considering I was pregnant at the time."

"It wasn't the best and I feel like it held me back. I was stuck in the past; stuck with people I was trying to keep away from. My licence says I'm not allowed to mix with other people on licence, but I was forced to, and it just brought back bad memories."

Some women told us that living in APs felt like they were still in prison because of the check-ins, bag searches and several other rules imposed on them, whereas others mentioned the bad condition of the buildings, e.g., cold and moldy with no heating, or lack of food offered.

CASE STUDY: JOSIE, 35–44-YEAR-OLD IRISH TRAVELLER WOMAN LIVING IN APPROVED PREMISES

Josie (pseudonym) is serving a community order. This is her second time on probation, and it has been a much better experience than the first time when she had felt 'rushed off' and had to report in-person once a week. This time around she is often allowed to report remotely, which has made her feel less stressed.

When Josie has to report in person, she reports on 'Ladies Day' which she is grateful for. Due to past abuse, she is scared to encounter men she knows, and men in general.

Josie had a 1-2-1 induction which included other support services that helped her. They were all women, which Josie found helpful and reassuring. Josie's new practitioner has gone 'above and beyond' and put all support services in place for her.

Josie's message to probation:

"Maybe having Ladies Days in all probation offices because I've heard they don't all have them, or that men still hang around. I wouldn't want to go to my appointments if I knew there was the chance of running into my ex-husband."

"Yes. My experience with domestic violence was taken into account which is why I'm in [Approved Premises] and my probation worker knows there's two Josie's, sober Josie and drunk Josie. She is always there if I need her to be and she set me up on courses to help with my aggression."

I feel safe and supported here because support is available 24 hours a day and the other girls are great. There are 21 activities a week available and 3 supported meals. I know it's a privilege to be here because I was in one in London years ago that was awful so when they first said I was going into an approved premises I was dreading it!"

CHAPTER 2: PRE-SENTENCE EXPERIENCE

EXPERIENCING ABUSE AND OTHER CRIMES

Over half (58%) of women surveyed had been victims of abuse, 42% had been victims of other crimes. In reality, these numbers could be higher as 14% of women answered 'prefer not to say' to the victim of abuse question and 18% to the victim of other crime question.

Most women told us they had been victims of family members and partners; some had been attacked or abused by strangers. No one had received the support they needed to deal with the trauma which had resulted in substance misuse for many.

"I was a victim of domestic violence and sexual abuse from a family member and most probably that's what set me off on the road to prison. I got no help at all so went off the rails. No normal person, with normal life experiences ends up mental health difficulties and addiction issues."

"I was attacked when I was younger and if I'd have got the right help then, I might not have turned to alcohol. I was just left to deal with it myself and I couldn't deal with it, with the trauma. So, I turned to alcohol."

"I was a victim of domestic abuse before I got in trouble so yeah that was probably why I got into drugs and that. And then everything just spiralled out of control."

We found that 71% of the women think being victim of abuse or other crimes had been the reason why they ended up in the criminal justice system, and a further 19% were not sure if that was the reason, which indicates the number might be even higher.

"I was victim of domestic abuse I mean I've been married a couple of times and both marriages were you know violent, yeah ... but I must admit I went to prison I was abused and the abuser. It was a factor in me being involved in the CJS."

"I haven't been a victim of crime, but I've been a victim of abuse ... that has happened in my country. I think it was a factor in what happened to me."

"I was a victim of abuse ... crimes were done on me a lot of the time, but I never pressed charges. It was definitely why I got involved in the CJS."

"Being a victim led to me going to prison, I believed everything my partner told me and that's how I ended up in court."

CASE STUDY: TINA, 45 – 54-YEAR-OLD DUAL HERITAGE WHITE / BLACK AFRICAN WOMAN

Tina (pseudonym) has a disability.

She had a 1-2-1 induction because she finds it difficult to cope in group settings.

Tina attends a women's centre once a month and prefers a female practitioner because she has issues with males due to abuse in the past.

She has had the same probation officer and has built up a good trusting relationship with her. She does not feel she has been punished by probation, rather she has been helped for the first time.

Tina's message to probation:

"Continue to listen to the voices of women and take into account the various added vulnerabilities."

"Absolutely. I have been a victim of numerous crimes as the victim, don't want to go into any detail. I was in an abusive relationship for over 14 years. Had a horrible childhood which played a part in getting into an abusive relationship. Was homeless prior to receiving a community order, was very vulnerable, suffered from mental health and committed a crime [smashing shopping centre windows] so that I could be sent to prison to get the help I needed as did not think there was any mental health services available to me in the community."

"Probation signposted me to [charity] as I was homeless having been living on the streets. They got me into a women's hostel, and I felt really safe. Got me referred to the mental health crisis team and was assigned a community mental health nurse and also a support worker who spends 1hr a week with me."

CASE STUDY: SUSAN, 25–34-YEAR-OLD WHITE BRITISH WOMAN

Susan (pseudonym) has a small child to care for.

She lives in small area and was worried to go to probation in case she bumped into people she knew. Fortunately, probation found a women's hub near her home. She is grateful and thinks that she would have been breached if she had to report in a mixed gender PDU.

Susan had 1-2-1 induction with only female staff members and service providers. Probation put Susan in touch with support services from financial advice to medical advice, and all has been organised in the women's hub.

Susan has had several practitioners which has been frustrating. She is really happy about her new practitioner who is younger and understands and supports her fully. She makes Susan feel that her feelings are genuine.

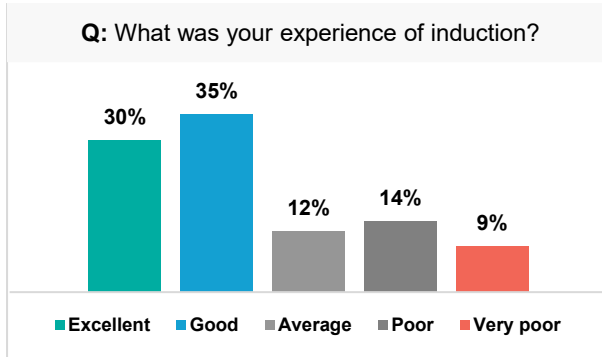
Susan's message to probation:

"I think there should be a better choice of unpaid work and not put people into situations that put them at risk. They should look at the ages of the people who have been put on Probation and pair them up to someone of a similar age, who they can talk to. It really helped me to have a younger one."

"I'd done a lot of courses, and they were trying to make me do it again. I said I'm not putting myself through it again, I don't want to relive everything he did to me. It was my ex-partner, why I ended up in that situation. ... I can't keep going over it and for my daughter's sake, I need to be in a good place and every time I have a meeting about him, I come home and I'm not myself."

"I think if, you know, I'd had to go to the standard Probation Centre ... I don't think I would have wanted to go and I would have breached, so I think being a woman and having a choice to go to a women's centre really helped me to go."

CHAPTER 3: INDUCTION EXPERIENCE



65% of women on probation reported having a positive experience with their induction. Women told us they felt understood, were not judged, and said their needs were taken into consideration.

When we asked whether their gendered needs were considered during induction and the resulting plan for their order, 28% of women felt that their gendered needs were not considered. The most reported issues were being treated as a 'tick box', being controlled, and their requests for accommodation or preferred PDU location ignored.

"It was basic - they were asking me questions about transgender. They kept just asking me lots of equality questions - it's just a tick box."

"I think that there are two things here. They expect you to "know better" but then treat you like a child and I don't like that. I also feel like my mood is commented on a lot which I don't think would happen to men."

“The induction was just filling out a couple of forms - it was a 1-2-1 and she didn't tell me anything about what to expect. In general, appointments haven't been thought out well.”

“Last sentence was by video link. They didn't really explain much and I don't think my needs were considered because I had a place at a supported house near my partner but they moved me miles away.”

However, 44% of the women felt that their gendered needs were considered during induction or assessment. They spoke about having been given female practitioners and other support workers, reporting in female only spaces, and given flexibility around childcare responsibilities and pregnancy.

“I was pregnant at the time of my induction and my probation officer was very understanding, made sure I was comfortable and could access what I needed.”

“I explained that I have two young children and I felt that was taken into consideration positively.”

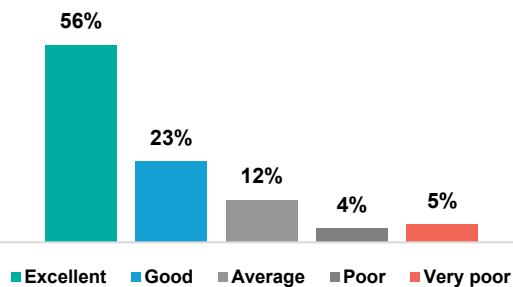
Regarding their induction experience, 43% of neurodivergent women reported their induction experience was 'poor' or 'very poor'. In comparison, 24% of neurotypical women reported a negative experience.

"I was in a coercive controlled marriage I was gaslighted everything in the book. No one was listening no one cared to take the time to look at what was actually going on. But more relevant is I'm dyspraxia and dyslexia so my delivery explaining events hindered me I believe I was totally misunderstood because of my disability and opinions were formed of me."

"Not needs as a woman more as someone with autism were neglected even my name was spelt wrong, I know I am a criminal, but I was treated like I was scum."

CHAPTER 4: RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROBATION STAFF

Q: How is your relationship with your current Probation Officer?



From our engagement, 79% of surveyed women and 71% of interviewed women reported having an 'excellent' or 'good' relationship with the probation practitioner. Understanding a person's individual needs and unique life situations was said to be the key in developing an effective and trusting relationship between people on probation and probation staff.

"She was very polite. Professional. And very understanding about life issues. I always attend my appointments no problem, but she would advise me correctly about what to do in certain situations."

"My relationship with my probation officer was great and she asks me and listens to me about my life worries and to potentially what is going to happen with my partner going forward/in the future."

Women told us that a good practitioner is someone who goes 'above and beyond' in supporting them.

"I actually would stay in probation if she was my probation officer going forward, she's actually the only person who actually really is there for me any time. She's strict with me but that's good and as I know she really has my back if she tells me something."

"My Probation Officer helps me to move on with my life ... she's even attended some of those Social Worker meetings. ... She's given me nothing but praise and has been a big support - she's done too much for her job role to be fair ... she's gone above and beyond."

Across all inspected PDUs, 9% of surveyed women and 29% of interviewed women stated that they have a 'poor' relationship with their practitioner. The majority of women who reported having a poor relationship with their practitioner said it was due to not being able to trust their practitioner. The second most reported issue was the changing of practitioners and therefore having to tell their story and re-live their trauma repeatedly.

"I can't be honest with her, I hold back. I don't fully trust her actually. It is very patronizing. If you called me a year ago, I would have sung their praises, but I haven't had that continuity this time."

"I got myself right, not probation, they didn't stop me offending. I did. Last time, I'd lost my nan and mum told my officer I was struggling, felt isolated but then went on a bender. When I told my probation officer, she got me recalled. That meant this time, I didn't feel like I could be honest because they'd just throw me back in [prison]."

MALE PRACTITIONERS

Only 23% of the surveyed women had been asked whether they would prefer a male or a female practitioner, most had been automatically given a female practitioner.

The women who told us they preferred to have a female practitioner had either been victims of male abuse and therefore did not trust men or stated that a man would not understand all gender related issues like being a mother, giving birth or menopause.

It is important to mention however that many women we interviewed and surveyed, did not mind having a male practitioner, highlighting the importance of individual approach, and asking people on probation for their preference of practitioner's gender.

"I preferred a female PO as have issues with males due to abuse I have suffered in the past and don't feel comfortable around them."

"I've got nothing against men, but I feel like as a wife and a mother, sometimes you need that woman's touch to feel able to talk through things. I don't think if I had a male officer I'd open up as much as I do because I don't think they'd have that level of sympathy that women do."

"I don't recall if they asked me if I wanted a male or female. ... I wouldn't have minded either, it would depend on the officer and their approach towards me."

"I had no choice of a man or a woman, but if I had the choice, I'm gonna take man to be honest ... I feel like two women together is problems, you know?"

CASE STUDY: ANNA, 35–44-YEAR-OLD WHITE BRITISH WOMAN

Anna (pseudonym) has ADHD and Autism and is a carer for her daughter.

Anna's probation experience has been reasonably good, this is her first time on probation. Probation has helped her with her mental health, but she is still fighting with her anger issues.

Anna has a good relationship with her practitioner, she can be honest. However, she thinks they are slightly intimidated about her and therefore often just agree with her. Her practitioner has accompanied her to social service appointments and helped her with children's services.

Anna reports in mixed gender facility, which does not bother her. She feels her voice has been listened to, mostly because she is 'in your face' kind of person.

Anna's message to probation:

"Have the help, be more aware, rather than having to kick off like I do. From a timid person's point of view that don't wanna ask these questions, they're never gonna ask, so they need to know that there's help that they can get."

"I wasn't a victim of crime before the CJS ... I didn't see that, but going through the trauma courses, my stepdad being abusive ... I thought it was normal growing up ... so it's followed-on."

"I've been put in touch with another mental health lady, so I do feel that seeing probation has helped, yeah ... I'm not in the place I wanna be, cos I'm still overly obsessed with still hurting this woman, so it's a bit of a worry as there is only few months left. I'm an over-sharer, so yes, I can be honest with my PO. I do feel that sometimes when I go in there, I'm all pent up and when I come out, I feel better."

CASE STUDY: DONNA, 45 - 54-YEAR-OLD WHITE BRITISH WOMAN

Donna (pseudonym) is suffering from PTSD; this is her first time on probation.

Donna does not think her gender impacts her probation experience; however, she does wish more adaptations were made for women in relation to reporting facilities and services.

Donna does not feel confident talking to her practitioner, she is traumatised by her past experiences and is afraid she will be misrepresented if she speaks about her experiences. Even so, she does feel she gets what she needs from her appointments; the PDU is close to her home, and she has been referred to Unlock and EDMR (PTSD therapy).

Donna's message to probation:

"It would be good for some adaption to be made for women. Waiting areas for women only maybe, having a clear idea of women only organisation and services that are located locally."

"I don't feel confident talking to my PO, because I am traumatised by my experience, and I don't really open with anyone. I am worried that I am been misrepresented."

I don't believe I was necessarily heard. Regarding starting to work and she can't seem to follow through. I do worry that there is a miscommunication on both parts."

CHAPTER 5: EXPERIENCE WITH APPOINTMENTS

MIXED GENDER FACILITIES

Q: Are your appointments in female only facilities?



Regarding appointments, 58% of women on probation are reporting in mixed gender facilities. When asked 'How does having to report in mixed gender facilities impact you?' half of the women said they are ok with it, 30% said they are not ok with it and 20% were unsure.

The most common response from those who say they are ok with mixed facilities was that 'it doesn't bother me'.

Women who do not like mixed facilities reported feeling intimidated, anxious, nervous, and even scared having to mix with men, this was mostly due to their past abuse related trauma.

Only 6% of women said the meaning of 'female only facility' was not explained to them.

Having to report in mixed gender facilities made some women feel anxious and intimidated.

"I find it a little bit intimidating, if you're walking in and there's a lot of men in the waiting room. Maybe they could have two separate waiting areas."

"It's mixed, and I feel uncomfortable around men so that bit isn't good, gets my back up. I was abused when I was younger so I don't feel my needs are considered there. It doesn't help there's men everywhere when I go for appointments."

“There’s mixed male and female when I’m there, which can sometimes be intimidating because you can over think about what the men might have done to be here. It would probably improve if there was the chance it could just be women because I’d be more relaxed. It’s not the best environment.”

“Sometimes it’s scary. I’ve been a victim of abuse and sexual assault more than once so being left in a waiting room with the only staff behind glass is quite scary, especially when you don’t know what the guy has done.”

According to our findings, the 2016 Inspection recommendation to offer women on probation opportunities to have their appointments etc. in female only environments to improve attendance and to remove barriers, has not fully been implemented. There are still women who are not given a choice to report in female only facilities or do their unpaid work in all female settings.

APPOINTMENTS

When we asked the interviewees if they get what they need from appointments, 55% said they do, 36% said they do not, and 9% were unsure. Emotional support and the ability to have remote appointments when needed were mentioned by those who felt they get what they need from appointments. Lack of mental health support, having to travel long distances to appointments, not given the choice for remote appointments, and practitioners rushing appointments and not being enough goal focused were mentioned by women who were not getting what they needed from appointments.

“Yes definitely, this worker has set me up with support and made sure they were all included from the get-go. My appointments are mostly by phone now but at first I had to go every week, just on Ladies Day. I don’t think that could be any better for me.”

"There doesn't seem a lot we have to do, just work through my sentence plan. For me, it would be better to do 1 in person and 1 by telephone the next month."

Many women told us how women's centres and hubs, which offer holistic, and women-centred approaches, had a positive impact on their probation experience because they make the experience easier and more personal.

"I was able to go visit probation at a women's hub which made the whole experience a lot easier and personal."

"At Probation, there is a woman there from a place called "Women Matter", which helps with advice, financial issues and sometimes there's a nurse there doing blood tests... They speak to you as if you're one of their friends - they know they're in a women's hub. All them little things do contribute to it."

The 52% of women who would like to see improvements in appointments wanted:

- 1) better communication with their practitioners
- 2) more remote appointments and home visits due to work, childcare and / or health issues,
- 3) financial help with travel to PDU's, or PDU's that are closer to them.

Some women also mentioned more spaces with relaxed atmosphere, sanitary products, and a coffee machine.

However, almost half of the surveyed women said their appointments did not need to improve.

"Stockport do perfectly fine they work around u when working and work with my work for my appointments."

"I can't even think how much better that can be with me honestly, I feel safe with my workers."

"No improvement, my appointments have met all my expectations."

BREACH AND RECALL

21% of the surveyed women said they had either been breached or recalled. The two most common reasons for breach and recall were missing appointments due to health reasons or lack of information about appointment times and breaking of restraining orders.

"I was breached because I didn't attend an appointment when my mental health was suffering. I went to court and the judge was okay with me and gave me another chance."

"I broke restraining order but not intentionally, I was set up, but I also actually never thought how to broke it was breaching my order."

CASE STUDY: EMMA, 25–34-YEAR-OLD WHITE BRITISH WOMAN

Emma (pseudonym) had a bad initial experience of probation due to probation not accommodating her childcare responsibilities.

Emma has had five different practitioners since she started her community order.

She found it hard to attend in-person appointments due to childcare responsibilities and was frustrated that the appointments were really short. She does not understand what she is supposed to get from them.

Emma reports in a mixed gender PDU and feels it can often be intimidating.

However, Emma is now grateful to her practitioner(s) for finally listening to her and giving her remote appointments and flexibility around childcare duties.

Emma's message to probation:

“Consistency with officers, female only sessions at the offices. I just feel women would engage better with the officers in a female only environment. And having different officers means no-one ever really gets to know you so how can they know what's best for you?”

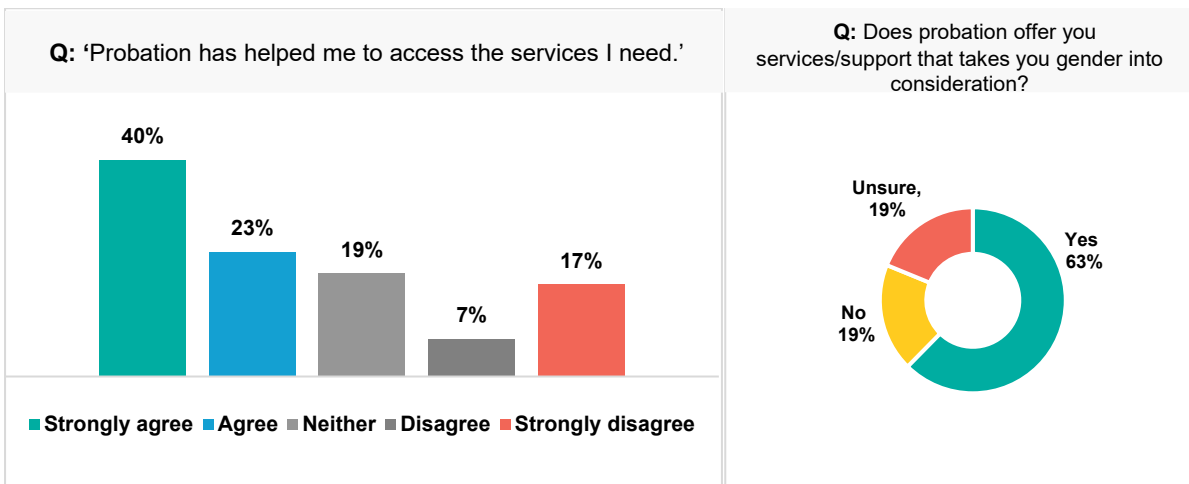
“After that initial experience, yes. They took into account my childcare issues and gave me the same appointment every week which I could then arrange around.

I've had 5 officers so far. I'm not bothered whether I get male or female, the one male I've had was actually really nice. I wouldn't say probation has helped but it's not been unhelpful either. I can be honest with them but it's only ever 5 minute appointments so there's only so much I can say.

I know I keep saying it but them changing the appointments was massive for me and that's probably because I'm a woman. It would be better if they did do all women days at the office to make the environment feel safer. And they should point you to the women services, you shouldn't have to ask.”

CHAPTER 6: ACCESS TO SERVICES

More than half (57%) of women on probation stated that probation has helped them access the services they need and offered them services that take their gender into consideration (63% of surveyed women and 48% of interviewed women). We found that the quality of the relationship between women and their practitioners had a direct positive impact on women getting the services they needed.



"I think so, yes. I've had contact with Nelson's Trust from the Prison. ... Also, I've been put in touch with the volunteering people and trying to get out and about. I do think there's enough services for women, there's loads of stuff that has been going on ... cooking and different activities. I'm quite close to the centre of town here, so it's quite good."

"They got me into a women's hostel and I felt really safe. Got me referred to the mental health crisis team and was assigned a community mental health nurse and also a support worker who spends 1hr a week with me. Probation Office helped me to secure my own accommodation with a housing association."

"I speak to Women's Matter and my Probation Officer all together. ... Everything's done under that one building, which makes it easier and better for me, to do it all in that one day, so I don't have to keep going back and forth."

"They've helped me access every service that I've asked for this time."

Women who were not getting the services they needed mentioned location and insufficient signposting as the main reasons for it.

"I feel the support they say I'm having isn't what I'm actually having. There isn't enough services for women, well, not where I am but it is very isolated."

"There aren't enough services for women, definitely not in this area anyway. There's mixed sex ones, but again, it just makes me uncomfortable being around men."

"Nope, they vaguely do. Unless I contact them, I don't get much help aside from pointing me to the services and leaving me hanging."

Unlike the 2016 Inspection which found that services for women were at risk due to insufficient funding³, it seems that women on probation were generally getting better gendered service provision in 2023. However, rural and isolated areas are still lacking in gendered service provision.

UNPAID WORK

As part of their community sentence, 26% of the interviewed women had received unpaid work or community pay pack but many said they are unable to do unpaid work due to physical health and mental health issues. Some women, who had not received unpaid work, told us they would like to because it would help with isolation and loneliness.

"No. Although I did ask and was refused. I am signed off work due to mental health issues."

"No, I wasn't allowed to work. I was just given a workbook which was useless."

The 2016 Inspection recommended that responsible practitioners should take gender-factors into account when determining the most suitable interventions for women, this does not seem always to be the case in relation to unpaid work and community payback.

³ A thematic inspection of the provision and quality of services in the community for women who offend. London: HMI Probation; 2016.

CASE STUDY: ANGELA, 25–34-YEAR-OLD WHITE BRITISH WOMAN

Angela (pseudonym) is on license and has mobility issues, she has had a reasonably good probation experience.

Angela does not think her gender has impacted her experience; she says her ex-boyfriend had a worse experience than her.

Angela has only had one practitioner who took a while to understand Angela's problem with travel but in the end understood her mobility issues. She also helped her to sign on to a debt course and helped her to find a job.

She feels probation should have looked more into her drug misuse issues and what caused them. She doesn't really understand what she is meant to get from appointments and thinks that because they are so busy, they treat people on probation as 'tick boxes'.

Angela's message to probation:

"Concentrate on the problems we say we're having, not ones that prison thought we was having."

"I had to do loads of courses and do this workbook full of stuff I'd already had to do in prison. Waste of time to be honest. No one asked me about any past experiences other than when I was answering the book questions and it wasn't really looked into, just something I had to answer."

"Well, I think they should have been more on my drug problems, keeping away from them. But they did put me in touch with people who help with debts who got my job so in a roundabout way yeah."

"They're just ticking boxes really, aren't they? My officer always had queues of people waiting for her, so it was always doing stuff as quick as possible."

CASE STUDY: EMILY, 35–44-YEAR-OLD WHITE BRITISH WOMAN

Emily's (pseudonym) probation experience overall has been good.

Emily has only had one practitioner and feels she has helped her move on with her life but wishes the practitioner would give her more information about activities and opportunities. She would not mind a male practitioner.

Emily was part of the Community Accommodation Service Tier 3 (CAS3) scheme that houses women on probation. She is now living in her own room which is a converted office.

Emily has also been supported by the Nelson Trust and was referred to CBT by probation when she had a breakdown. Emily is most happy about all the women's services that are available to her, she is starting yoga soon.

Emily's message to probation:

"Women's health ... that kind of aspect - offers to call doctors and things. You could do with a mental health nurse there ... just in case of anything you need to mention when you come out of prison."

"I've been a victim of crime before this and there was stuff that I reported to the police before I was arrested. ... I went off the rails a bit. I got involved in the CJS because of these things."

"It is a female only facility and they didn't explain that. I'm assuming that it is as it's called "safer Wales" and there only ever seems to be women there. My needs are catered to as a woman. ... There are sanitary products in the bathroom and the kitchen is always open."

"I've been put in touch with the volunteering people and trying to get out and about. I do think there's enough services for women. There's loads of stuff that has been going on, cooking and different activities. I'm quite close to the centre of town here, so it's quite good."

CHAPTER 7: BEING HEARD BY PROBATION

Of those interviewed, 74% felt that their story is heard by probation staff, and many of those women who had been on probation before said that this time they did not feel judged or punished.

"I don't feel judged now so that's probably why I'm doing so well. It felt like more punishment before."

"It doesn't feel like a punishment, it feels like a support. It is helping me to move on with my life."

"Yes, 100% ... I feel like they're not here to judge me, just to help. 100% they show me empathy and listen to my story."

Despite feeling that they were heard, some women felt practitioners did not fully understand or take into consideration women's past experiences or trauma. Furthermore, those women who felt that their voice was *not* heard by probation said it was due to lack of empathy towards their trauma or circumstances.

"I feel respected by probation, but they didn't really probe too far into my past to work out whether my experiences relate to my crime. I don't think they have the time."

"My practitioner listened and sympathised with my history but I don't think they fully appreciate the trauma I went through. I didn't feel judged at all, not by probation."

"No, I've not had a chance to tell my story. I feel like my offence is petty and I haven't been able to go into detail about why I'm there and what it's like to be a mum. I felt judged being on Probation - they didn't touch base as to why I was there ... there was no detail as to why I was there!"

"No one even considered there might be a link to what I've gone through and how I've ended up in prison."

Some women felt they had to be extra vocal and 'in their face' to have their voice heard by probation.

WHAT IS WORKING WELL IN PROBATION?

When we asked the participants 'what is working well in probation?' the most common answers were female practitioners, 'women only' days, and gendered services and activities.

"The Ladies Day, the fact I don't have to deal with any men at all, that all my support services are women. It's different to last time when I feel I was brushed off."

"I go to a female place only... New Dawn, New Day. ... They think about me as a woman. They've got everything under one roof."

"All the women's services ... I'm gonna be starting yoga. There seems to be a lot for women, crochet and things, if you want to join in."

"That I've never seen a man in the probation office because that would have affected my anxiety which is already bad enough."

Other popular answers included having their childcare and feminine health issues taken into consideration and having all services under one roof.

"When talking to males, they don't understand the menopause. Being given [name] was a blessing because she does understand."

"They are considerate and kind. When booking the times of my appointments they also consider about when I have to do the school run or if I have any other appointments that day. Also, if you have a baby then when your midwife and anti-natal clinic appointments are."

“They are more lenient towards being late for appointments, because of your period.”

CHAPTER 8: PEER-LED SOLUTIONS

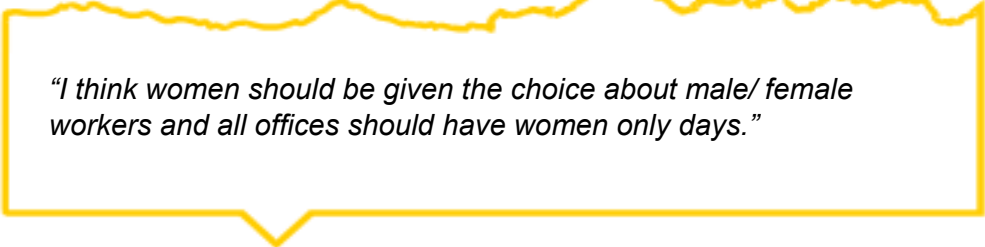
User Voice is a solution focused organisation. The 77 women on probation we interviewed and surveyed for this consultation proposed seven solutions on how probation can better focus on and work with women, and to provide services for women.

THE ISSUE:

Not all women on probation are asked whether they want a female or a male probation practitioner, or if they want to report in 'female only' or mixed gender PDU's. Some women prefer female practitioners and some male practitioners.

SUGGESTED SOLUTION:

Every person on probation should be asked for their preference of practitioner, and whether they are comfortable reporting in mixed gender PDU's.



"I think women should be given the choice about male/ female workers and all offices should have women only days."

THE ISSUE:

Having multiple and changing practitioners and therefore having to re-live their past trauma and experiences is negatively impacting many women's mental health and rehabilitation.

SUGGESTED SOLUTION:

Probation should develop 'caseload sharing' practices where few practitioners share caseloads and know people on probation 'stories' so when the main practitioner is not available their case load sharing colleagues can stand in for them.

With this model, people on probation do not need to repeatedly share and relive their trauma.

"It would be helpful if there was more consistency, having the same officer. Retelling your story can be traumatic."

"Well, there's too many but even just speaking to just 1 person instead of being handed pillar to post might help. The starting all over again just gets you down and further down every time."

THE ISSUE:

Many women feel overwhelmed, alone, and isolated when on probation.

SUGGESTED SOLUTION:

Probation should establish and encourage more peer support initiatives where women on probation can meet to discuss issues impacting them and support each other.

"They should have more groups for other people going there and maybe the charities could go there too. They need to have something there for integration when they are coming out. Maybe ladies could have a group ... so they could chat about it. Maybe people who have anger ... then they could talk about it."

THE ISSUE:

Many women struggle while on probation because they are signposted to multiple different services and then left to sort everything out themselves. Women who are attending women centres, where all services are under one roof, report better experience of probation and rehabilitation.

SUGGESTED SOLUTION:

Probation should adopt more holistic multi-agency approaches that bring services together to support women.

"I think it could help if the charity organisations came to the Probation office as well. They should be open to accommodating people from different charities to help people with integration."

"Improve on the problems surrounding housing because I'm finding it really hard and I'm losing the will to live. Not literally, but you know what I mean. My view is that there must be something more that can be done between the council and probation."

THE ISSUE:

Many women report that their past trauma is not properly considered by their practitioners.

SUGGESTED SOLUTION:

Probation should offer more mandatory training for a 'trauma informed approach' to all practitioners. These skills should be refreshed annually.

"We need to be asked about our experience, like you're doing now, instead of just being told "this is what you have to do."

"My practitioner listened and sympathised with my history, but I don't think they fully appreciate the trauma I went through."

THE ISSUE:

Many women are not able to take on unpaid work even if they would like to because of their physical health or mental health issues. Most work is physical and therefore not suitable for all.

SUGGESTED SOLUTION:

Probation should review what unpaid work and community pay back is available and make sure individuals with different physical, mental and/or neurological conditions can also access them.

"I do think there should be a better choice of unpaid work and not put people into situations that put them at risk."

"No [wasn't given unpaid work]. Although I did ask and was refused. I am signed off"

THE ISSUE:

Some women who have caring responsibilities, are in full employment and / or have certain mental health as well as physical health issues feel having to always travel to in-person appointments can be counterproductive to their rehabilitation.

SUGGESTED SOLUTION:

Practitioners should assess people's situation on individual basis and offer more remote or home appointments to women who clearly benefit from them.

"The main thing is that if someone like myself who is low-risk, has a stable home, it should be considered that we don't necessarily need to attend the offices. There should be some flexibility where perhaps there could be telephone interviews."

USERVOICE

ONLY OFFENDERS CAN STOP RE-OFFENDING

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