

Nacro
Justice ExChange

The Better Futures Project

Briefing 5: A Probation Service fit for the future

Nacro
Justice ExChange

The Better Futures Project

Briefing 5: A Probation Service fit for the future

About the Nacro Justice ExChange

The Nacro Justice ExChange is a network of people who have been in contact with the criminal justice system and received support from Nacro with their resettlement journey, including people who are currently in prison or have previously served a prison sentence.

We share the same goal: using our experiences to inform those in power of what the issues are, and to influence the development of criminal justice policy to ensure that it works better for society, communities, families, victims and the individuals caught up in the system.

We propose practical solutions based on lived experience of the system.

About the Better Futures Project Briefing: A Probation Service fit for the future

This is the fifth in a series of reports that examine the practical steps that can be taken to support people in contact with the criminal justice system to create better futures. To reduce reoffending rehabilitation, tailored to the needs of the individual, must be at the heart of an effective justice system. For people who enter the criminal justice system it should be the start of building something better, not a road to nowhere.

The Probation Service plays a critical role in supporting and supervising people in contact with the justice system. Members of Nacro's Justice ExChange regularly share their experiences of being under probation supervision - what worked; what didn't; the challenges the service faces; and what they think would help strengthen the service for the future.

This report has been produced in collaboration with members of the Justice ExChange to inform the debate about how the Probation Service can be strengthened to better support people to create positive futures and reduce the risk of reoffending. It has been informed by individual interviews and focus group interviews with people who have been supported by Nacro while being supervised by probation. In total, 74 people were interviewed either individually or in focus groups and a number of them worked collaboratively to determine the content of the report.

Summary

This report is centred around the following themes:

- The role and purpose of a probation officer;
- The key qualities of a probation officer;
- How probation supports people with their rehabilitation;
- What people on probation can do to get the best out of the relationship.

The purpose of sharing the views of people with lived experience in this report was not to develop a list of recommendations but to ensure that the experiences of those who have been under probation supervision are shared and heard and taken into account.

We highlight the following emerging themes from our interviews:

Fulfilling the dual role of probation through effective rehabilitation: The most effective way to protect the public is to support effective rehabilitation, enabling people leaving custody to build a stable life and contribute to society. If the focus on public protection and the management of risk takes precedence over rehabilitation, or becomes the sole focus, rehabilitation can be undermined, and lasting change can then be limited.

Recruitment and training of probation staff: The feedback from people who have been supervised by the Probation Service and the qualities they believe to be key in probation officers should directly inform recruitment and training. These include honesty; listening and people skills; empathy and a caring non-judgmental attitude.

Lower risk doesn't equal lower need: As probation supervision changes to prioritise those who present the highest risk, those with a wide range of needs, such as mental health, substance misuse and housing must not be overlooked. Those who represent less immediate or severe risk to the public are often people caught in the revolving door of offending, or at risk of their offending becoming prolific if they aren't able to access support.

Recall: The huge increase in the use of recall has clearly impacted the relationships people have with their probation officers. The framework to support decisions to recall needs to support effective decision-making and be fair and proportionate, balancing public protection with the impact on the rehabilitation of the individual.

Pre-sentence reports: The capacity of probation to prepare high-quality pre-sentence reports in conjunction with each individual is essential to ensure that sentencing decisions are well-informed and consider how to best to support rehabilitation and reducing reoffending.

Probation in prisons: Effective transitions from prison to community are only possible if supported by smooth handovers between prison and community probation officers ensuring sharing of information and release plans with licence conditions that are informed by previous engagement and supportive of growth.

Employing people with lived experience in both probation and the voluntary sector: The insight and experiences of people with lived experience are invaluable to creating a diverse and knowledgeable workforce that can best support people on probation. To make this a reality there must be a greater focus on mentoring roles, overcoming current barriers of vetting, stigma and lack of relevant work experience.

The Probation Service

Background

The Probation Service has its origins in the late nineteenth century when "missionaries" were appointed at Southwark Court with the initial aim of "reclaiming drunkards". Historically its approach was described as being to 'advise, assist and befriend'.

The Probation Service is now part of His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and is responsible for supervising people in England and Wales who are serving community sentences or have been released into the community from prison. The stated aim is to protect the public through the effective rehabilitation of people who have committed offences.

The Probation Service has undergone two major reorganisations in the last two decades. In 2013 Transforming Rehabilitation opened up the market for rehabilitation services to private, voluntary, and social sector organisations but was widely criticised for creating a fragmented and complex system, increasing costs, and negatively impacting staff morale.[1] In 2021, the Ministry of Justice reunified probation services to bring them back under full public control.

Over recent years significant staff shortages have resulted in unmanageable caseloads for probation officers with significant concerns raised by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. Between February 2023 and February 2024 none of the probation services or regions inspected received a rating better than 'Requires Improvement'.[2]

> **"The Probation Service has too few staff, with too little experience and training, managing too many cases."**
>
> HMI Probation 2024 Annual Report: Inspection of probation services

From April 2024, the Probation Service introduced operational changes under its 'Probation Reset arrangements'[3] to help alleviate workload pressures, by reducing probation supervision requirements for low and medium risk people."[4] The Government also announced plans to recruit over 1,000 additional trainee probation officers by March 2025[5] and in February 2025 plans to recruit a further 1,300 trainee probation officers were announced.[6]

In response to the Independent Sentencing Review in 2025[7], the Government announced additional funding of up to £700 million per year by 2028/29 for the Probation Service "to deliver transformative reforms to sentencing based on the recommendations of the

1. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmjust/285/28504.htm
2. https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/32/2025/03/Probation-Annual-report-2024-2.pdf
3. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/probation-reset-implementation-evaluation
4. https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/document/national-inspection-april-2025/#8-Staffing
5. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/lord-chancellor-sets-out-immediate-action-to-defuse-ticking-prison-time-bomb
6. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/lord-chancellors-sets-out-her-vision-for-the-probation-service
7. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/682d8d995ba51be7c0f45371/independent-sentencing-review-report-part_2.pdf

Independent Sentencing Review.". The Sentencing Act 2026[8] implements a number of the recommendations of the Review which ultimately will lead to more people spending more of or all of their sentence in the community. These changes have significant implications for the capacity needed in the Probation Service and wider community support services. In March 2026 Government announced changes to the way staff assess overall risk, integrating the use of statistical tools and an 'overall rebalancing of staff time away from lower-risk offenders' to allow greater focus on those considered to be higher risk.[9]

The perspectives of people with lived experience of being supervised by the Probation Service

Interviews with people with lived experience of the Probation Service centred around the following themes:

- The role and purpose of a probation officer;
- The key qualities of a probation officer;
- How probation supports people with their rehabilitation;
- What people on probation can do to get the best out of the relationship.

What is the role and purpose of a probation officer?

The role of the Probation Service has changed over time moving away from the original requirement to 'advise, assist and befriend'. The Independent Sentencing Review called for a "fundamental shift in the way the Probation Service works, prioritising opportunities to build relationships with offenders to rehabilitate them, thereby reducing reoffending and the risk of harm to victims."[10]

Those interviewed understood the role and purpose of probation as protecting the public, supporting with people's rehabilitation and providing guidance and support. Many spoke of having a positive relationship with their probation officer. However, many also felt that probation officers don't offer the support they need, with the focus instead being on a punitive risk management approach. When asked what the role of probation officers is, responses included:

> **"Assist me in my rehabilitation and to monitor me for the public's interest. They should be there to assist my rehabilitation and to assist offenders like me. They are the only point of contact for many people upon release from prison. They are often the only person they have to lean on when released from prison."**

8. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2026/2
9. https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/52333/documents/290605/default/
10. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/682d8d995ba51be7c0f45371/independent-sentencing-review-report-part_2.pdf

"I thought it was to help my rehabilitation and to help me get back in to work. I expect them to help me find employment. Help me with things like claiming benefits as I did not know the system as I was new to the environment. I didn't really get any of that."

"It's become a punitive force that is there to control people and not help them. When I was younger your probation officer would be involved in what was going on in your life, would get to know the whole family, and that worked. None of that happens now, it's a hollowed out service."

The Probation Service has the following functions in the criminal justice system:

At court: Pre-sentence reports

The Probation Service is responsible for delivering pre-sentence reports (PSRs), providing advice and information to help judges and magistrates in their sentencing decisions. This allows courts to tailor sentences to individual circumstances and give sentencers confidence that specific requirements are suitable and available in their area.

Those interviewed talked about the difference a PSR can make, particularly where trust has been built.

"Probation should develop some sort of stable trust. If they don't then it isn't going to work. I have a really good relationship with my current probation officer. She goes out of her way for me, and so I trusted her enough that when I got into trouble and committed another crime I told her about it. She was really supportive, and I think that what she wrote in my pre-sentence report meant I didn't get a prison sentence. It made me think 'I must be doing something right' and she wanted me to do well, which means a lot to me and meant I wanted to do well too."

People also tell us that they feel that they have little input into their PSR, and that they are little more than 'tick-box' exercises written by someone that does not know them.

"Your PSR is what gets you sent to prison. If your PSR says you should get a community sentence, then usually that's what you'll get. But if the PSR says 'custody' then that's what you'll get. But they don't really get to know you and understand what's been going on, so they can't really say what you deserve or what will help you."

The number of PSRs prepared by the Probation Service, and the quality of those PSRs, has declined dramatically in recent years.[11] HMI Probation noted in 2024 that "less than half of all inspected court reports were deemed to be sufficiently analytical and personalised to the individual, supporting the court's decision making."[12] PSRs are important to rehabilitation and reducing reoffending - People are more likely to receive a custodial sentence when a PSR is not available for the court, and people who have a PSR when sentenced are then more likely to successfully complete their court order.[13]

In prison: Preparing for release

Probation officers in prisons work to help people prepare for release, manage their risk to the public, and ensure they have the support they need to reintegrate into society.

The people that Nacro support, and our staff, often find that the Probation Service does not always have the capacity to effectively support people in prison prior to their release. Many speak about insufficient contact with their prison probation officer (or prison offender manager – POM), which impacts on their resettlement into the community.

The people interviewed who spoke positively about their relationship with their POM were held in category D open prisons. People who spent time in open conditions were more likely to report that contact with their POM, and community probation officer (or community offender manager – COM) was better, saying that this leads to the building of trusted relationships.

> **"The majority of prison POMs are in a perpetual state of firefighting and dealing with short sentences and recalls - so those on longer sentences are neglected or only considered last-minute."**

In the community: Resettlement and rehabilitation

In the community, probation officers supervise people serving community orders and people released from prison during the period of their licence. Their role is to support people and help them to reintegrate into society, while also protecting the public by assessing risk and managing their behaviour.[14] Probation officers can also refer people under supervision to commissioned rehabilitative services (CRS) funded by the Ministry of Justice to support with: accommodation; personal wellbeing; emotional wellbeing; lifestyle and associates; family and significant others; finance, benefit and debt; dependency and recovery services.

People tell us that they feel that their good behaviour in prison does not get communicated to probation staff in the community or taken into account when licence conditions are set, and that there is only a focus on risk and negative behaviour. There

11. https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/42651/documents/212004/default/
12. https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/32/2025/03/Probation-Annual-report-2024-2.pdf
13. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64886d4f103ca60013039e45/impact-oral-fast-delivery-psrs.pdf
14. https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/probation-service/about

is no record of a continuous journey through the system and achievements are not recognised from one stage to the next – nor is risk translated from one stage to the next – this lack of history impacts the motivation of people in contact with the system, and the safety of agencies working with them.

> **"When I was in prison, I genuinely believed that if I kept my nose clean, worked hard and was a helpful member of the prison community then it would help me when I was released. I thought it would help me to have a good relationship with probation, be taken into account in my licence conditions and help me to be able to get a job and somewhere to live. I was an enhanced prisoner and worked as a mentor and a Listener when I was in prison, but that meant absolutely nothing when I was released."**

> **"Before I was released I was in an open prison, and so I was getting ROTL [release on temporary licence] to work in the community and spend some weekends at home with my family. I was trusted and was given the freedom to begin to rebuild my life whilst I was inside. But then I was released on HDC [home detention curfew] and had to live in accommodation that was miles away from home. I had a 7pm to 7am curfew which meant I really struggled to spend any time with family. I was so much more restricted than when I was in prison, all of the trust I'd built up counted for nothing."**

Many people we interviewed see the Probation Service as a purely punitive body, focused on a narrow view of public protection rather than the positive outcomes that could be achieved through building relationships with people under supervision. People are often scared to speak openly to their probation officer, which can be a significant barrier to supporting them to tackle the root causes of their offending.

> **"You can't be honest with them and say 'look, I've had a drink' because you don't know what they'll do. It would be better if you could be more honest because that would help you stay on track."**

Under the reforms known as 'Probation Reset' many people are receiving support for shorter periods. This means that people who are low and medium risk will usually not have face-to-face appointments with their probation officer during the final third of their licence period. Those with complex support needs – such as housing, mental health, and substance misuse - have found themselves adrift without the support that they need.

> **"I really valued the support I got whilst I was on probation and the other services I was referred to. And then when Probation Reset came along it all just stopped. I didn't know where to turn. One day I was a problem and then the next day, that was it, done. I felt abandoned and it really set me back."**

What are the key qualities of a probation officer?

There were clear themes in the qualities people believe are important for a good probation officer:

- Consistent and well-informed;
- Respect and honesty;
- People skills and life experience;
- Empathy and a caring non-judgmental attitude;
- Approachable and willingness to listen.

Consistent and well-informed

Having a consistent approach is considered important, so people know where they stand. To be consistent, probation officers should be well-informed so that they deal with issues properly. The importance of probation officers following through on things they say they will do was repeatedly emphasised; people often speak of reliability and integrity as being key qualities.

Our criminal justice services at Nacro often hear from the people that we work with about a lack of continuity. Those who spoke most positively about their relationship with their probation officer had generally had consistent support from one officer. However, other people said that they have lost count of the number of officers they have had and that this is a significant barrier to building relationships. It can also mean that referrals to interventions are repeatedly offered but not followed through. Some said that, when they got a new probation officer, it felt like the officer did not take the opportunity to get to know them, or were simply seen as part of the 'pile of papers on someone's desk.'

When speaking about the importance of consistency and being well-informed those interviewed said:

"Honesty and integrity, reliability and visibility… they should not promise things they cannot deliver… a probation officer needs to be well informed on questions that regularly will crop up."

"I could not have asked any more from my probation officer. He was keen for me to work with other organisations to help with my rehabilitation. If he didn't know the answer to anything he was good at signposting me to the correct people. Although I had a positive experience with my probation officer I appreciate this is rare."

"I had a different probation officer for every appointment for a few months. It meant I had to keep telling my story over and over again, and although they talked about the things that I could do, things that could help me, it never happened. It was nine months before I was referred to Nacro [personal wellbeing service]."

"Continuity and consistency of staff and communication between them is important. And probation should work in small pods so colleagues nearby are aware of the clients on their books so they can pick anything up in their absence so you get more consistency."

"Where probation staff are unaware of their remit and there is a lack of standardised training – it leads to inconsistencies and contradictions. Less experienced probation officers do not always know what they can and cannot support an individual with and are often led by what others are doing – which may be right or wrong."

Respect and honesty

Those interviewed spoke of the importance of respect, as this creates relationships where trust can be built. People often report feeling a lack of trust from their probation officer, and a lack of belief in someone's ability to change, which has a negative impact on the relationship. People also want honesty from their probation officer – they want to know where they stand and have honest dialogues, but they report that this is often not the reality.

"They think that they (probation) are above you and they do not trust you."

"I don't think they believe rehabilitation is a real thing that can happen to people. They are too ready to punish people with a criminal record than believe people can be rehabilitated, so their role turns into micromanagement."

"They need to be able to listen and pay attention to what someone is saying, but I think before they meet the people, they are making judgments about them. It's very rare that there's any trust between the two parties because the probation officer is looking for fault to minimise the risk of reoffending. They tend to automatically assume that the person will reoffend. Probation feel that they are playing an authoritarian role and not many of them understand why they're doing that because of their training. It comes down to who they were as people before they were probation officers."

People skills and life experience

Those interviewed thought the best probation officers were those that had good people skills and life experience. These often mean they can relate to people on probation on a deeper level. Some, but not all, spoke of some probation officers lacking the life experience they need.

"They should be polite, courteous. Listen to you. Open and honest. Non-judgmental."

"They need real life experience. They need general people skills including basic things like looking someone in the eye."

"I would like to see officers being someone with more life experience and who actually talks about rehabilitation."

Empathy and a caring attitude

Having an understanding of the issues of people who come into contact with the criminal justice system, and demonstrating a caring attitude, is vital to promoting good relationships. Having enough time to build rapport is also considered important.

Many of the people interviewed said that people still need support and guidance when they are doing well or considered to be low risk, because low risk doesn't always mean low need, and people's needs fluctuate over time.

"Empathy… knowledgeable about broader social aspects. Consistency. They should want to help people and change the revolving door."

"You want someone that's genuine and has empathy. I can always tell when someone is faking it, and that's the end of my trust."

"Not many probation officers can relate to people going into prison. they don't understand the reasons why people go into prison. Being sympathetic and compassionate is the main thing and this doesn't exist in probation."

Approachable and willingness to listen

Those interviewed spoke about the importance of probation officers being willing to take the time to talk and listen to what people being supervised by probation have to say. Nacro's criminal justice services often hear about probation appointments as 'tick-box exercises' with little genuine engagement on a human level and that people feel 'communicated at' rather than 'communicated with.' Those interviewed said probation appointments should be more meaningful:

"They are there to guide you. They should work closely with the prison before being released. They monitor you and is somebody you can confide in. A person who can guide you in the right direction. They should ask you the basics. How are you? What have you been doing? Discuss work, accommodation or your ability to pay your bills but you rarely find these questions are asked."

"Every meeting I've had has been the same, there isn't much that's different. I was worried that she would base my characteristics off what she's seen on paper but when she met me, she realised I was different to my offending. It would be nice if probation had more of a backstory and find out some more about that person. I think that probation has personal bias that need addressing."

"The person on probation is often the last to know of any changes or decisions being made about them."

Most of those interviewed said that they see their probation officer reasonably regularly, although some report that their appointments are sometimes cancelled with little notice. People don't always understand why their appointments are fixed at the intervals that they are or understand what they need to do to lower their risk and have less frequent appointments.

How do people see probation supporting them with their rehabilitation?

A probation officer supports an individual along their rehabilitation journey by monitoring their conditions, connecting them with support services and resources such as commissioned rehabilitative services and providing them with guidance and support to reduce the risk of reoffending.

Many people interviewed had been referred by their probation officer to one of Nacro's Community Rehabilitation Services, including accommodation support and personal wellbeing services. Some said they didn't know what other services their probation officer may be able to refer them to, and some felt they needed more support but didn't know what was available or how to get it. A number spoke about specific needs, particularly regarding their mental health, that they had not received support with. Some felt that a lack of transparency creates a sense of unfairness and that some people felt that probation officers can take a selective approach to making referrals. Some reported lengthy delays in being referred to other services for support, often linked to frequent changes of the person acting as their probation officer. It is also clear that many people felt that the support that they received was not 'joined up,' being referred to different organisations for different things, but with little connection between different organisations.

When speaking about how probation officers help to support people with their rehabilitation those interviewed said:

"I found it was a tick box exercise, and they tar everyone with the same brush. I was scared and vulnerable when I first went in there. They need to do more with getting people into employment."

"My mental health issues were skirted over but there was no assistance with getting me a referral and I had to find any help and resources myself."

"They did help me with accommodation. My first probation officer treated my search for accommodation with suspicion – he thought I had an ulterior motive for the accommodation I was looking for. Not many probation officers can get out of the opinion that once you've been found guilty you'll always be guilty. The rules that apply to people on probation don't apply to the police or probation

because you're left guessing. There's very little human element. They never compliment any achievements or ask how someone is doing … they suspect you've done something wrong. They need to trust more in the people they're supporting."

"I went on a parenting and relationship course which I completed ahead of going to family court about my children. I've also had help with my benefits and budgeting. They were really helpful."

"They don't really help with rehabilitation. Half an hour every fortnight is not supporting. They have big caseloads and they should be limited to make the service work better. If you are able to work but can't get a job I would like probation to promote community work."

"In my personal experience I feel like probation hindered rather than helped. It was already hard enough getting a job without hitting needless, extra barriers. Probation need to apply discretion and common sense. They tick boxes as these are more important than rehabilitation. They could do a lot better."

"Because I'm not a problem, and don't cause issues that I'm counted as low risk and so I don't get too much engagement [from probation] because of this. She [the probation officer] explained it as having more people that are more of a worry, so I don't really know what my officer has done to help me with rehabilitation since I've been released."

What people on probation can do to get the best out of the relationship

Those interviewed said it is important for people being supervised by probation to be open and honest in their interactions with their probation officer. However, they were clear that this can be difficult to do, particularly as many fear being recalled to prison if they disclose issues that they are struggling with. Many also spoke about how valuable they would have found it if they had a mentor with lived experience to 'show them the ropes.'

> **"People need to be honest with themselves and the probation officer. It can be really intimidating because there's someone there that has loads of power over you and your life, it can be like sitting down and talking to a police officer."**

> **"It is down to the person on probation, not probation, to get the most out of it. Always being honest and open, as well as not being deceitful."**

> **"The main aspect is to engage fully. If they say jump you say 'how high?' You are never going to win if you kick off whilst under supervision of probation. You are not in charge of your life at that point. If you are unsure of anything, call them. Get clarification on everything. Fully engage and play by the rules and if you do that there is no reason you will not have some sort of relationship with probation."**

Recall

Recall to prison is an important power to manage risk to the public and ensure the public is protected. But the sharp rise in recalls over recent years, with fewer than one in four involving a charge of further offending, suggests the current system isn't working. The number of people recalled to prison has more than doubled since 2015, as 52,716 people were recalled in the year to June 2026.[15]

At Nacro, staff and those we work with find that many recalls are avoidable, and people do not always understand what may cause them to be recalled, causing stress and anxiety. People are recalled for missing appointments or because they are homeless and so in breach of their licence. Returning to custody can stall progress, and can lead to losing jobs, homes and connections. When recalled to prison those we work with do not always receive support to tackle the underlying causes of their offending. Deterioration in behaviour during a licence period can often be the result of insufficient support.

Those interviewed for this report believe that the power of recall is a significant barrier to their ability to build positive relationships with their probation officer as they feel that recall hangs over them and is a bar to open and honest conversations.

15. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2026/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2026

"It should be down to the court and not probation because it would help probation. People might get recalled because of workloads in probation, so recalls might reduce if it wasn't down to probation. I don't think it's fair that someone who's not a judge is making these decisions."

"If probation didn't have the power then recall powers would be given to some other power like the police and it might even be worse. Because other institutions don't have the training or the knowledge."

"In my opinion you should only get recalled if you commit a new crime. There is a current strain on the prison service as it is."

"Maybe a panel of three organisations could feed into the decision but ultimately, I think it should still be probation's decision. There should be a stepping stone down such as doing some community work rather than just going for a straight recall if the breach is not too serious which would also help with the overcrowding in prisons."

The power to recall was felt to have a detrimental impact on people's relationships with their probation officer:

"Yes it affects it very much so. Anyone who has been traumatised by the judicial system is very untrusting of someone who can put you back into the system at the click of a finger. I walk on egg shells every time I am around them. It doesn't get the best out of people, and it shuts people down. Probation recall people without any repercussions. People are very protective of what they tell their officer because of the risk of recall."

"The risk of recall impacts people's relationships with probation in a negative way. If someone is recalled to prison then it should be automatic that you do not get the same probation officer again … most people change an officer during their journey and this might be the ideal time for a change."

Regardless of where the decision to recall sits, support providers should have the opportunity to make representations. People continue to engage with Nacro's services when their relationship with probation has broken down. The insights of professional staff and volunteers in supporting organisations working with probation officers are valuable. They can support a more holistic understanding of the experiences and challenges that could be a risk to someone's safety, stability and reoffending.

Conclusion

As the provisions of the Sentencing Act come into force, a strong and effective Probation Service becomes ever more critical, as are the services in the community which support rehabilitation.

To build a justice system for the future, the services that support people in the community – both the Probation Service and the voluntary sector organisations that provide vital support – need to have the funding and the resource to do the job well.

This report highlights positive examples of probation officers providing high-quality support and creating relationships to help people build their lives and move away from offending. But it also highlights examples where the challenges the Probation Service has faced over many years have led to poor levels of trust and support. The identification of what is important and the qualities and strengths of a good probation officer brings real opportunities to learn and develop. Ultimately, the ability to build productive and supportive relationships is key.

The purpose of sharing the views of people with lived experience in this report is not to develop a list of recommendations, but to ensure that the experiences of those who have been under probation supervision are shared, heard and taken into account. However, at a time of significant change as the Sentencing Act come into effect, there are emerging themes highlighted that require greater focus. Strengthening the role and effectiveness of the Probation Service will ultimately increase peoples' chances of turning their lives around, moving away from crime, and reducing reoffending:

Fulfilling the dual role of probation through effective rehabilitation: The most effective way to protect the public is to support effective rehabilitation, enabling people leaving custody to build a stable life and contribute to society. If the focus on public protection and the management of risk takes precedence over rehabilitation, or becomes the sole focus, rehabilitation can be undermined and lasting change can then be limited.

Recruitment and training of probation staff: The feedback from people who have been supervised by the Probation Service and the qualities they believe to be key in probation officers should directly inform recruitment and training. These include honesty; listening and people skills; empathy and a caring non-judgmental attitude.

Lower risk doesn't equal lower need: As probation supervision changes to prioritise those who present the highest risk, those with a wide range of needs, such as mental health, substance misuse and housing must not be overlooked. Those who represent less immediate or severe risk to the public are often people caught in the revolving door of offending, or at risk of their offending becoming prolific if they aren't able to access support.

Recall: The huge increase in the use of recall has clearly impacted the relationships people have with their probation officers. The framework to support decisions to recall needs to support effective decision-making and be fair and proportionate, balancing public protection with the impact on the rehabilitation of the individual.

Pre-sentence reports: The capacity of probation to prepare high-quality pre-sentence reports in conjunction with each individual is essential. This will ensure that sentencing decisions are well-informed, as well as considering how to best to support rehabilitation and reducing reoffending.

Probation in prisons: Effective transitions from prison to community are only possible if supported by smooth handovers between prison and community probation officers, ensuring sharing of information and release plans with licence conditions that are informed by previous engagement and supportive of growth.

Employing people with lived experience in both probation and the voluntary sector: The insight and experiences of people with lived experience are invaluable to creating a diverse and knowledgeable workforce that can best support people on probation. To make this a reality there must be a greater focus on mentoring roles, overcoming current barriers of vetting, stigma and lack of relevant work experience.

About Nacro

At Nacro we see people's future whatever the past. That's why our housing, education, justice, and health and wellbeing services work alongside people to give them the support and skills they need to succeed. It's also why we fight for their voices to be heard and campaign together to create lasting change.

We work across the criminal justice system (CJS) and our justice services aim to break the cycle of crime and disadvantage. We directly support people in the CJS who are on a community order or on release from prison, including advice with accommodation, personal wellbeing and finance, benefits and debt. We deliver the Community Accommodation Service (CAS-2) on behalf of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), housing prison leavers on Home Detention Curfew and those bailed from court in need of an address, as well as a range of supported housing projects for people leaving prison. And we run a Criminal Record Support Service providing professional advice to thousands of individuals and employers.

We believe that rehabilitation must be at the heart of an effective justice system. And that for people who enter the criminal justice system it should be the start of building something better, not a road to nowhere. We've been working in this field for almost 60 years – we know that with the right support, people can and do turn their lives around.

We are grateful to all members of the Justice ExChange for giving their time, energy and ideas to help focus our campaigning work.

October 2026

Nacro

nacro.org.uk
Registered charity no. 226171

Follow us online

Telephone **0300 123 1889** · Email **policy@nacro.org.uk** · Walkden House, 16–17 Devonshire Square, London EC2M 4SQ