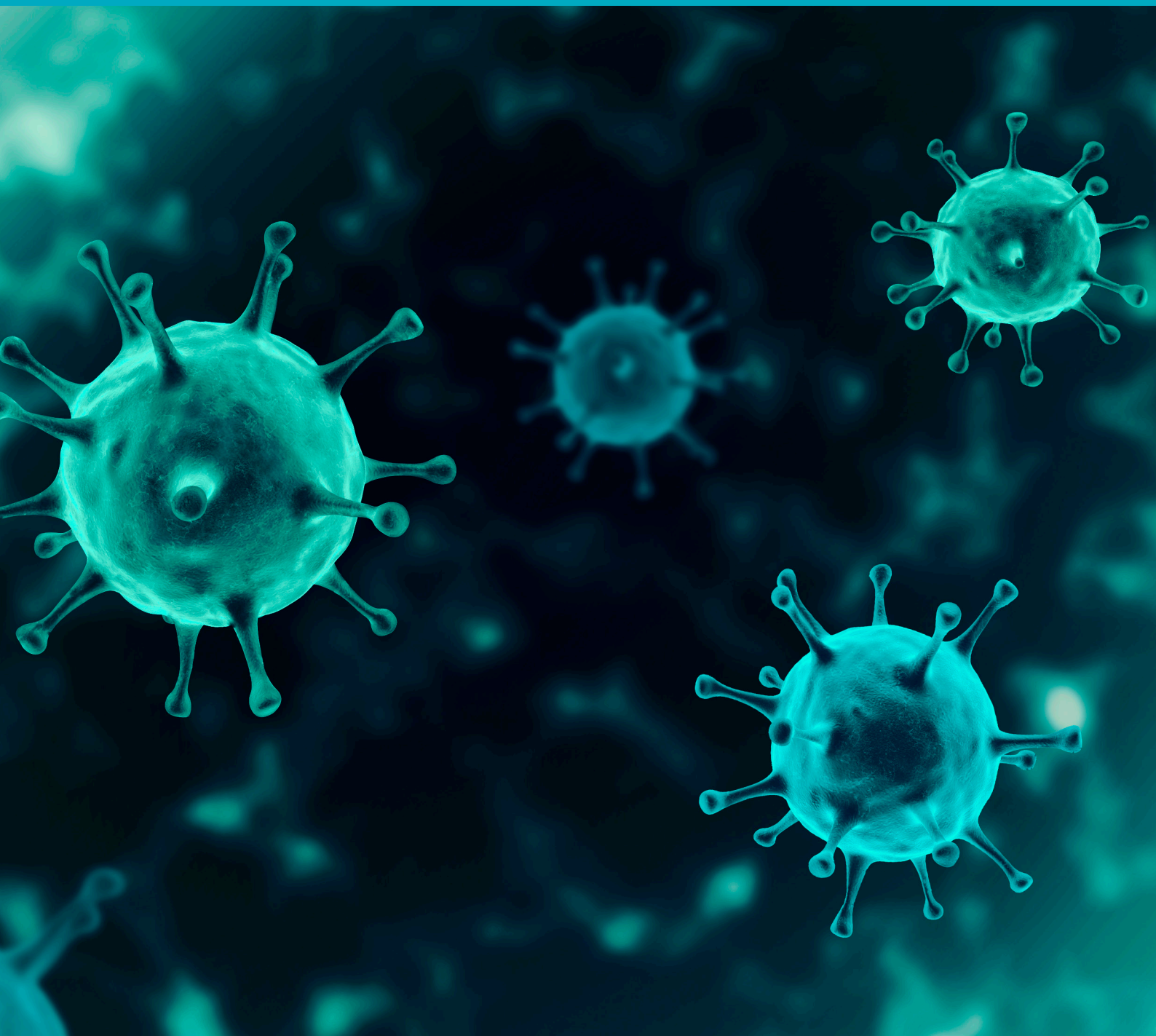


Service user perspectives on how Probation is 'getting back to normal' after the COVID-19 pandemic.



Take home messages

Most people spoke about a positive experience with Probation, preferring to talk on the phone than travel into the office.

But not everyone felt like this. For some, the pandemic was hard, and they needed more support than a telephone call.

For some, Probation was the only support they had during the pandemic but this was limited because community services were closed.

Some of the most important messages were;

- Service users were keen to keep telephone calls as part of their supervision
 - Officers asking people about their wellbeing has helped to improve relationships, as have the longer appointment times
- Some people still prefer face-to-face meetings, especially if home life is difficult or it is hard to talk about offences in front of family members
- Support needs can change, particularly in a pandemic when there are less services to help
 - Contact with people before prison is more important than ever
 - If people do need to visit offices, offices should be COVID safe
- When officers can help people access specialist support – this is welcomed
 - People are worried about the impact of the pandemic on their order. This includes concerns about breaches and completing orders on time
- Clear communication is important, so that people know where they stand and understand requirements
- Ending the probation relationship can be difficult. Planning and preparing people for ending their order is helpful

Context

Probation changed the way it worked during the COVID-19 pandemic. From March to July 2020, an 'Exceptional Delivery Model', or EDM, was put in place to help reduce the spread of the virus. This meant most people on Probation were not supervised in Probation offices but on the phone and sometimes by someone from Probation visiting them at home from a distance.

EP: IC were asked by HM Inspectorate of Probation to look at how the EDM was working for service users and we spoke to 33 people in the summer of 2020.

At that time, we heard how people generally liked not having to go into the offices. We also heard how the slower pace of life had been good for some service users trying to build relationships back with family after prison. We saw a spirit of 'we're all in this together' which had helped break down some barriers with Probation.

On the flipside, we also heard some people found it hard to connect and build relationships (and trust) by telephone, particularly those just out of prison and those who did not speak English as a first language. Some calls to the office went unanswered. External providers had shut their doors due to the pandemic so many felt they weren't getting enough support. Some were worried about recall because they weren't clear on what was expected of them.

There was a mixed picture of how people were finding the EDM.

In July, Probation services changed again. This time, to 'recover' from the EDM.

A thematic inspection took place in September 2020 by HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) around how this 'recovery' phase was going. EP: IC were asked to support the inspection by speaking to service users in:

- Essex
- West Mercia
- Thames Valley
- Stockport Tameside
- East Midlands
- Bristol and South Gloucestershire

This report outlines what people said. A full report can be found [here](#).

Who we spoke to

In total, we spoke to **71** service users

76% male and **24%** female

73% White British, **6%** White Other, **10%** Black, **7%** Asian, **4%** 'Other

65% were on probation following a prison sentence

35% were sentenced to community supervision

What we found

1. Contact with Probation

Since the summer, most service users we spoke to had not noticed any changes to their supervision. Of those who did see change, most had their supervision reduced. A very small number saw their supervision increase in this time.

Understanding changes to supervision was important to service users. Those who said their supervision had increased were confused as to why this was.

“I worry... they’ve increased contact from monthly to 3 times a month. I don’t think it’s necessary...”

A few NPS service users said they had ‘outside of residence’ or doorstep visits.

No one we spoke to working with CRC was receiving doorstep visits, but some Probation Officers had offered to meet service users when they thought it would help them. Most appointments still took place over the phone and most people like this change. People said this was easier and less disruptive to their lives.

“I’m actually much happier. It always seemed a chore to go to the office. Sometimes it would take an hour to get there just for a 10-minute meeting.”

People told us not travelling to offices saved them money, as well as time. People who had jobs told us telephone calls meant there wasn’t so much disruption to their work. Others found it less stressful to talk on the telephone.

“I don’t think probation understand how hard it is

sometimes when you are feeling low to get to an appointment that you are being forced to go to.”

Most service users said telephone meetings were longer over the phone and this was a positive change. However, those who still had face-to-face appointments said these were shorter because of COVID-19 safety measures.

“I don’t understand why, because surely they have the same amount of people, but I don’t get a 5 min slot anymore, I get more like half an hour now. You can get more done in half an hour.”

Most people who were asked to come to an office understood the need to be seen in person, though some were worried about COVID-19. Most we spoke to said COVID-19 security was good, although some were concerned where people weren’t wearing masks or where hand sanitiser wasn’t available.

Although most liked the remote contact, some felt their needs had changed during the pandemic and it wasn’t enough to have a quick call. A few people felt it was difficult to ‘bond’ with a probation officer via telephone and would have liked more face-to-face contact. Reasons for this included:

- It is difficult to talk and connect by telephone
- It was hard to discuss offences at home in front of family
- People struggled with lockdown and liked to go out
- Mental ill-health.

Prison leavers found it difficult to have remote (or no) contact with Probation in the lead up to their release.

“I didn’t meet my officer while in prison and I thought it wasn’t OK

for someone I had never even met to be making such massive decisions about me and my life."

2. Support from Probation

People explained community services being shut had forced Probation to change the way they worked.

"I've always been referred onto places but suddenly there wasn't anywhere to refer me to. I was their problem."

Lots of community services were still closed, so there was a gap in support. Some said regular contact with Probation helped fill the gap and for some, Probation had become a 'lifeline'. People said supervision during lockdown seemed less about monitoring risk and more about wellbeing. Most service users thought this was a positive change.

"We get on really well, I can tell her when I am struggling even if she has no advice, just nice to have someone who listens."

Having fewer services in the community was stressful for some service users, especially those with mental health worries. We heard many mental health appointments had been put on hold and it was difficult to contact services. Despite efforts from Probation to try to help, some people felt they didn't have the time or resources to support them.

"He's done what he can, but it feels like he's facing as many barriers as I am. But at least I feel I've got somebody on my side."

Most people believed community services were vital to rehabilitation and were disappointed they had stayed shut. Some felt 'dumped' by these services. We heard that Probation tried to support people to understand what services were running at the current time.

Getting a job and accessing mental health services was seen to be the most difficult support to obtain during this time.

However, some successes included:

- Getting counselling
- Access to courses (remotely)
- Help with housing
- Restorative justice opportunities.

3. Complying with orders and ending probation

We heard some people were grateful for the initial lockdown period, because it had given them a chance to reflect and take a break. However, as time went on, we found service users wanted to 'get on' in life, and many were feeling stuck rather than grateful.

"Lockdown affected me mostly because I wanted to get going but everything was, and still is, at a standstill."

In a similar way, people said they were worried about completing probation orders because of COVID-19. Those who had unpaid work or RAR days didn't know how to complete their targets. For most, unpaid work had stopped or had reduced contact hours. Some were worried this meant not completing or complying with their order. They said that no one knew the answer to this which made things worse.

"I've started my unpaid work again; I've got 72 hours left and 4 RAR days. I'm worried about finishing my hours before licence finishes as they've reduced the

amount we can do and the number of people on site. Nobody has been able to tell me what will happen if I don't finish on time."

Some people were concerned about ending probation. Mostly people felt they hadn't got the right support before their order finished. Some were worried that other services still wouldn't be open, and their only line of support (Probation) would no longer be there to help them. We heard it was important to prepare people for the end of their order.

"I think I would like to still have the support of my PO, but I've finished my order now. I'm not sure where to go for help now."

"I'm off my order soon, so the phone calls will drop off a cliff. I do worry as there is nowhere else to get support at the moment and probation have been helping with more than just reoffending. They've been there the whole time, and filled the gaps of other services."



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