



Justice and Home Affairs Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Community sentences

Tuesday 27 June 2023

10.40 am

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Members present: Baroness Hamwee (The Chair); Lord Beith; Lord Blunkett; Lord Filkin; Baroness Henig; Lord McInnes of Kilwinning; Baroness Meacher; Baroness Prashar; Baroness Sanderson of Welton; Lord Sandhurst; Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia.

Evidence Session No. 7

Heard in Public

Questions 79 – 89

Witnesses

I: Pavan Dhaliwal, CEO, Revolving Doors; Caroline, Representative, Revolving Doors; Ayesha, Representative, Revolving Doors; DeQeon, Representative, Revolving Doors.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Pavan Dhaliwal, Caroline, Ayesha and DeQeon.

Q79 The Chair: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee. I am going to ask our witnesses to introduce themselves in a moment. Most of us are here in the committee room, but Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia and Lord Filkin are online. We have apologies from Baroness Chakrabarti.

Welcome to our witnesses: Caroline, Ayesha and DeQeon, and Pavan Dhaliwal from Revolving Doors. We are quite aware that you are not going to talk about the offences in question. It is your experiences with the Probation Service that we are really interested in. Pavan, I know you are not going to speak on behalf of your colleagues, but if there is anything on behalf of Revolving Doors that you want to come in on, please do. We have your written evidence, and thank you very much for that.

I will ask the three of you to introduce yourselves. We would like to have on the record your role within Revolving Doors, the terms of your community order, the length, the type of requirement, and the year that you were sentenced—and that is because things have changed a bit over the years.

Ayesha: I am a lived experience worker with Revolving Doors. I have been with them since January. My pre-sentence, or suspended sentence order, was a Drug Rehabilitation Requirement (DRR), and it was given to me around 2017. There were two cases; one in 2008, and another one in 2017.

Caroline: I have been with Revolving Doors for three months, and I am part of the lived experience team. While on remand in 2021, I received a 24-month suspended sentence with Community Sentence Treatment Requirement (CSTR), and this included the Mental Health Treatment Requirement, or MHTR.

DeQeon: My sentence was a concurrent one for about four or five years, from 2017 all the way to 2020. I have been working for Revolving Doors for over three years, and I started in 2020.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Let me just ask one other question before I pass on to colleagues. You talked about requirements: were you asked to give your consent to the requirements before they were imposed? Were you told enough about what the requirements involved, so you felt confident that you knew what you were saying yes to? Ayesha, you mentioned the drug requirement.

Ayesha: No, the requirement was made for me, and it was an order that I had to adhere to. There was no personal input from me for any requirement. I did not have the choice or the decision of what was required of me.

Caroline: I did not have any input; it was proposed.

DeQeon: Same here: it was decided by probation what the requirements were going to be. It was not the magistrates who decided. Probation gave the magistrates the

requirement, and the magistrates then chose to follow what it told them to do. So, again, I had no choice; it was just laid on me and I had to do it. There was no other option. You had to do it or, probably, you were going to go to prison for those reasons.

Q80 Baroness Henig: Good morning, and thank you so much for coming along. It is really important for us to hear from you, who have actually experienced the system—you have been through it, and it is so valuable for us to hear about that.

I am going to ask a couple of questions about the Probation Service. Before you were sentenced, did the Probation Service prepare a written pre-sentence report? If so, were you able to contribute to it?

Ayesha: I was not taken into account in the pre-sentence report.

Baroness Henig: Sorry, you were, or you were not?

Ayesha: I was not taken into account. I remember signing it and reading through it, but what was required on the pre-sentence report did not include any of my input.

Caroline: While on remand, I had an assessment with probation, and then I received the pre-sentence report. I had no idea this was going to be proposed for me.

DeQeon: My experience with the pre-sentence report went really well, because I am a person who can talk, and express and articulate myself, and let the probation officer doing the pre-sentence report know what is going on. I could engage in the meeting with the probation officer, and I always had a really well done pre-sentence report. It was always fair. My personality—who I am and how I express myself, and how I engage with the person I am meeting—probably stopped me going to prison.

The pre-sentence report always saved me, because I am a well-liked person. Sometimes I feel like a lot of my friends who have been through the same situation do not know how to engage and articulate themselves. The probation officer on the other side probably looks at them and thinks, “Oh, they’re the same old status quo”, blah, blah, blah, ticks the boxes, and says, “We know this person is going to come down this line again”. It should not be like that at all. Not everybody is articulate like me; some people find it hard to talk and express themselves.

Sometimes, when you are meeting a probation officer and you do not know that person, it is hard to open up to them. It is hard to tell them what is going through your life and what is going on at that time. Then the pre-sentence report just looks like a “fozy” one. Do you know what I mean? Tick box, tick box. It just looks the same as the ones that magistrates would have seen before

With mine, the magistrates would say, “Oh, my God, this is a really well done pre-sentence report. This has been written really well”, because I could articulate and express myself and open up. I do not find it hard to be open with people, but others cannot express themselves; they are blocked away and they are locked up.

Baroness Henig: Ayesha, did you feel that the probation officer carefully prepared

the report and that the court fully considered it? Or did you just feel completely alienated from the process?

Ayesha: I felt alienated, and I have to take into account where I was at the time. I am a recovering drug addict today, but I was an active drug addict then. I was not able to manage my own life or communicate my needs. That helped them take the power out of my hands and to make the decisions for me, because it was a constant pattern and a constant cycle of me giving yes/no answers. The right treatment or the right requirements were not involved or enforced. The needs of a drug addict are unmanageable and are hard to meet.

Baroness Henig: Were you all in different courts in London?

DeQeon: I am from Leicester.

Baroness Henig: Your experience was with the Leicester court.

Caroline: I was on remand in Peterborough, so I was heard at Peterborough.

Ayesha: All my cases were in London courts.

Baroness Henig: It is just helpful to know which part of the country you are talking about.

Caroline, what about the probation report in your case? Did you feel it was carefully considered by the court?

Caroline: I have to be honest with you that when I went into prison, it was the start of Covid, so everything was up in the air. Like I said before, I just had the assessment and I received the pre-sentence report, and that is when I saw that I was going to do—

Baroness Henig: Then it was considered by the court?

Caroline: Yes.

Baroness Henig: Did you feel it was fully and properly considered?

Caroline: By me? Not really, no.

Baroness Henig: Not by you but by the court, perhaps?

Caroline: Perhaps so.

DeQeon: I always say Probation is the judge. The magistrates are just three people who sit there and it is put on their CV. If Probation says, "Do this", the magistrates do what Probation says.

Baroness Henig: Do they?

DeQeon: Yes, Probation is the judge. Probation says that they require a tag or a prison sentence, and the magistrates will do that. The magistrates are just people.

They sit there like a chair, and when Probation says, “This is what we think DeQeon should do”, the magistrates will do what Probation says. In my eyes, Probation is the judge.

Baroness Henig: In your experience, they did follow what Probation said?

DeQeon: Yes.

Baroness Henig: That is very helpful, but I am sure it can vary a little. It does not always work like that.

DeQeon: I do not think so. I have watched it.

Ayesha: I agree with what DeQeon is saying. In all my experiences of having to go before Probation, and then Probation bringing my report to the judge, whatever Probation had written—

Baroness Henig: That went.

Ayesha: Yes, it went. That was on all occasions. The judge is just the voice to say, “Oh, well, Ayesha, we are sentencing you. You have a six-month community order”, because the reports have already been written by Probation. Obviously, the judges would not explain all that, but it would be given to them and then they will turn round and say, “This is your order”. In my opinion, the judge is only there to deliver what Probation has said.

Baroness Henig: That is very helpful. Thank you.

The Chair: Pavan, we have heard what has been said about both the pre-sentence reports and the lack of consent to treatment. In your experience, is this typical?

Pavan Dhaliwal: A lack of quality in pre-sentence reports is one of the biggest issues to come out of our forums when speaking to lived experience members. I know this came up in the evidence you heard from Justin Russell about the on-the-day rapid delivery reports and them not being of high quality. We have members who have pre-sentence reports based upon what was happening in their lives eight or nine months prior, and not taking into account all of the steps that they will have taken in that time. The consensus view among our members is that, if the reports are done at all, they are just a tick-box exercise as opposed to being done in a meaningful, person-centred way.

The Chair: For the drug and alcohol and mental health treatment requirements, are they mostly just told?

Pavan Dhaliwal: They are just told. Obviously, you will hear from my colleagues today about where they can work quite well, if they are prescribed the treatment requirements. One big issue is around having a treatment requirement and the moment at which it kicks in. Again, it can take seven or eight months in some instances, during which time the person has relapsed.

There are also huge issues around dual diagnosis, so having one after the other as opposed to having a system which takes into account how a person actually is and how their needs should be met through different treatment requirements.

Q81 Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Thank you all for sparing the time today to come and speak to us. As Baroness Henig said, that lived experience is very important to us if we are going to be able to conduct this inquiry fully.

Moving on from the sentencing, I want to ask a bit more about your experience with the Probation Service when you were serving that sentence. What was your relationship like with your probation officer? Did you have only one probation officer during that period of serving your sentence? Secondly, if you could say one important thing that they did for you, or one thing that they did not do for you, what would that be? I am going to shake things up a bit and start with DeQeon this time.

DeQeon: From the age of 13 to, let us say, the age of 23 or 24, I served a community order concurrent. For me, what changed my life was when I met a lady called Louise, who works with Probation. She was like my mother. The first time I met her, we just connected. It was like God had sent her from above; she was there to be my guardian angel. I do not think I would be sitting here right now if it were not for Louise.

I became involved with Revolving Doors because of Louise. I joined a project called the Patchwork Foundation through Louise. If Louise had not come into my life, I do not think I would be sitting here right now talking to you guys. My experience with Louise as a probation officer was, like I said, that she was my angel from above; God sent her to me. Without her, I would not be this person today.

The other probation officers that I had after Louise—like I say, it was concurrent—were not as good. I feel that a lot of people who work for Probation actually have no life experience. They are academics; they have not been in the real world; they do not relate to the person they are talking to. When a person is actually speaking to a probation officer and telling them, “Look, this is what is going on right now”, they have not been through that or been in their shoes and they do not get it.

You have to relate to that person. They have to understand the struggle and understand what that person is going through. If I have not been through that, I do not really care. All I am doing is doing in my job is ticking that box, getting my casework done and getting my salary. It does not mean anything to me. For some other probation officers it means a lot, and they are there to work and to change. Do you know what I mean? You have got to have people working in the system who understand the system and who have been through it. You cannot have people who have not been in the system being the policymakers and the managers. Do you get what I am saying? I will stop because I am talking a lot.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: That has been really helpful. Is that very common in your experience in speaking to other people?

DeQeon: I would say 95% of the people who work in Probation are academics. They have been to university; they are the status quo. How can you have people working in probation who do not understand the other side of it? They only understand one side of it.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Is it fair to say that Louise is unique in the relationship you had with her?

DeQeon: I would not say she lived the life I lived. She was just a good person; she just got it. The first time I met her, I said that I wanted to get into performing and acting. She was like, "Come on, I'm going to take you to a drama school". She took me to a drama school, but I was not ready at that time. She believed in me, and she really was the best thing that had ever happened in my life. Sitting here right now and talking to you guys is because of her. The other experiences I have had have all been with people who do not understand it—they do not get it.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: They are doing a job.

DeQeon: They see it on the TV and they are like, "Oh, yeah, this looks good to do. Oh, let's be a probation officer". Do you know what I mean? The problem with Probation is that, if you have a criminal record, you cannot get clearance. There is only so far you can go, and this is the problem with government: you need people to be able to get clearance. I have changed my life. I am not a criminal. The things that happened to me were because of the environment I was brought up in and the parents I had. I did not get a good card; I was not given a good hand. Do you know what I mean? But I am a good card. Do you know what I am saying?

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: That is really helpful. Thank you.

Ayesha, what was your relationship like with your probation officers? How many did you have, and what important differences did they make to you?

Ayesha: All I can do is be honest. The relationships I had with Probation at that time were unmanageable, and not just because of where I was at. There were no consistent relationships with probation. I was constantly breaching because my drugs came first. I was unable to attend a lot of appointments. When I did attend a probation appointment, I always came out of there saying, "I don't know why I'm attending". I always felt it was just for a tick in the box that they had seen me. I know I can only speak for myself, but a lot of others are coming into my mind who have all had this same conversation and experience.

I could tell you what would make a good probation officer. It is some of the stuff that DeQeon has said: someone who is compassionate, understanding, with a willingness to need to and want to listen. I do not really want anybody to have empathy and feel my pain, but they should at least be compassionate and have understanding. Making those connections with somebody out there struggling with drug addiction can mean a great deal to that individual.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Do you think your probation officers had been properly

trained in dealing with people who have drug addiction?

Ayesha: To be honest, the job is advertised on the website, and people meet the criteria by ticking the boxes and filling out the big application form, but, if they are going to be the best they can be for the person who is struggling or coming in each week asking for help, it has to come from the heart of the individual. I agree with DeQeon.

Caroline: I had a very good relationship with my probation officer, and that was new for me. Over the years, I have had probation officers, but this one really listened to me and really focused on helping me. I had never had that before. One thing that really stood out for me was that she believed in me, which empowered me to make positive changes. As I said before, this good relationship made a huge difference.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Obviously, we have heard two experiences of very good probation officers, but that was out of how many for each of you? How many other probation officers did you have?

DeQeon: I had one when I was 13 who was really good. I have forgotten her name. She would tick the boxes but she was really good. I connected with her. I have forgotten her name, but she was good.

After that—we are talking eight years later—Louise was the best probation officer I have ever had. She went out of her way for me. I will say it again that she was the best thing that ever happened to me. I would not be sitting here today, talking to you guys, if it were not for Louise. She was like my mum, my angel. She was my best mate. She put herself out for me. It was mad, because the first time I met her she believed in me. She was like, “I can see your passion. I can see you’re special. I can see you have potential. I want you to get to the place you want to get to”. I was lucky. I do not hear many stories like that. So, the first probation officer was good; she ticked the box and was very professional, but this lady put her back out for me.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Caroline, in total, how many probation officers have you had to work with?

Caroline: Over the years, about 15.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: And one stands out.

Caroline: Yes.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: That is really helpful. Thank you.

Q82 **Baroness Prashar:** Thank you, for being here. It is very valuable hearing you, and I heard with interest your experiences with probation officers. Based on your experience, if you were to write a job description for what makes a good probation officer, what would you say should be in it?

DeQeon: I would say it should be someone who has been on the street—someone who has been there and understands what it is like. You have to relate to the

person; you have to get it. You cannot have people making policies and decisions who have never been there. You cannot tell somebody to stop having a drink if you have never had a drink. Do you know what I mean?

The problem is that there are a lot of people in Probation who have not been drug dealers or criminals and have never been in front of a magistrate. They do not understand it. To them, they do not get it. They will just be like, “Well, you should have done this, you should have done that”. When I am explaining, “Look, I’m homeless right now, and this is what I am going through. My mum’s dashed me out”, and this and that, they are listening but they are not getting it.

My description would be someone who gets it: someone who has been through the struggle, who has been down the dark tunnel and got into the light and then become a good person now their probation is over. There are not many probation officers out there who have been through what most criminals have been through. Do you know what I mean? Let us not say criminals but people who have had a hard time. We should not say criminals. We have been given a bad hand. We did not have good parents. We were not told to go to university. It was not the status quo. We were not brought up by academics. Our environment was full of drugs and criminality, but to us that was normal—we were told that that was normal.

You have to have people who get it, and who have been through the system and understand it from down at the bottom. A lot of people—and probably a lot of people sitting on this panel—have not really been on the other side of the system, have they? You are not really understanding but you are listening. Do you know what I mean?

Lord Blunkett: Part of the problem is, if we had, we would not be here.

DeQeon: Could you say that again?

The Chair: David was saying that part of the problem is that, if we had been on the other side, we would not be here.

DeQeon: Why would you not be here? You could be here. It does not matter what side you have been on. You could be here. That is the whole point of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. You have to have life experience. You cannot have one side bad and one side light; you have to have both. You can be here—of course you can. You cannot say that at all.

Ayesha: I agree with DeQeon. David, we can be here because our lives have changed. I did not expect to be sitting here, giving evidence on my past. We can be here.

Baroness Prashar: Can you come back to the question? What, in your view, would make a good probation officer? I hear what you are saying: that you need understanding, empathy and compassion, without having gone through the experience. What do you think would make a good probation officer?

Ayesha: I would say they need to be understanding, compassionate and open-minded. I looked at the job role for a probation officer, and they are asking for all of those qualities, more so understanding and maybe compassion. But when I look back within my past, I do not feel that I had a hand of probation officers that were understanding or compassionate, whether because of where I was at that time or because of the energy I was picking up from probation. I would say they need to be understanding, compassionate and open-minded.

Caroline: I agree with both DeQeon and Ayesha. For me, they need to be non-judgmental and have a real willingness to help the person.

Baroness Prashar: You were the one who said that you had a good relationship with your probation officers. What made that relationship a good one?

Caroline: She listened to me. She was able to relate to me. She believed in me. She really wanted to help me to make positive changes in my life, and that came across.

Lord Sandhurst: I have a particular question for Ayesha. Of the three of you, if we look at your last probation experience, you were the one who did not have a good relationship with the probation officer. Is that right?

Ayesha: Yes.

Lord Sandhurst: You had a drugs treatment order.

Ayesha: Yes.

Lord Sandhurst: You are obviously doing terribly well now, and your life has changed—that is what you have told us—which is wonderful. What was it about the order that made the difference? Was there someone else involved who you did have a good relationship with? What was it that turned you around?

Ayesha: Well, it was not probation.

Lord Sandhurst: What was it?

Ayesha: It was not probation that turned me around. I would say it was the connection that probation gave me to the Turning Point drug agency—but I could have found it without probation.

Lord Sandhurst: Probation provided the link to the drug agency.

Ayesha: Yes.

Lord Sandhurst: Once you got there, you were then dealing with people who gave you a routine, et cetera.

Ayesha: They tried to enforce me going to groups, but the main thing it helped me with was getting on medication that could subsidise the drugs I was taking. It helped in that sense.

Lord Sandhurst: It was really the agency which had you moving in the right direction.

Ayesha: Yes.

The Chair: Caroline and DeQeon, with a good relationship, how long were you spending with the probation officer? Was it once a week or once a fortnight?

Caroline: For the first three or four months, it was once a week. It was actually a mixture of attending in person and over the telephone because of Covid restrictions.

The Chair: How long did you spend with them each time?

Caroline: It could be a half hour; it could be an hour. We often had three-way meetings, so you just could not tell.

The Chair: Did they include a supervisor?

Caroline: No, my probation officer referred me to other organisations—for instance, a peer mentoring service. We would have a three-way meeting, where it was myself, the peer mentor and the probation officer. Then, about four to five months in, it decreased to once every two weeks and then once a month.

The Chair: DeQeon, how often did you meet?

DeQeon: Like I said, I was with Probation for over 10 years, from the age of 13. It was not because I was a bad kid. I do not know what happened: I was on one and then I became ill, and then I was in the hospital and they said I needed to drop these letters in, but I did not drop them in and so I then got a breach, and then it became longer and longer.

With Louise, sometimes I would see her twice a week, and not even because I had to. If I had any mental health or doctor's appointments and I needed to get them sorted, Louise would come and pick me up and take me to them. She was there for me a lot. I would go and see her probably once a week and play badminton with her. Like I said, she was like my archangel; she was there all the time. If you picked the phone up, Louise was there. I would see her probably twice a week.

As I have got better at being able to handle life and got into a good place, I have not needed to see her as much at all. I have not seen Louise in about two years. I am in a good place now in my life but, when I was in a bad place, Louise was my rock.

The Chair: I will bring in David Blunkett now, but I remind him that we do have one colleague in the House of Lords who talks very openly about his experiences in his youth.

Q83 Lord Blunkett: Lived experience in the Commons and the Lords is important. I am merely making the point that the Appointments Commission is pretty iffy about our backgrounds, which is something we could address.

My question has been touched on substantially in the questions from Mark, Lord McInnes, and in the query that Guy, Lord Sandhurst, has just raised. Is there any evidence of Probation signposting other services, not the direct ones for which the sentence applied but housing or community support services? I wonder if the three of you could reflect on that. Were there any support services outside what you were mandated to have by the court? Were they signposted by your probation? Louise would have done this, because Louise is clearly a saint—if only we had more people like Louise.

Ayesha: Signposting?

Lord Blunkett: Like a housing or community group that could be helpful, or a support group outside the immediate ones that you were mandated to go to. If there were none, just say so.

Ayesha: I think there were. I was going through issues with housing and they were able to signpost, and maybe tried to write a supporting letter for me for housing. There was a group going on within probation, but there was a waiting list to get on to it. I will leave it there.

Caroline: My probation officer referred me to the domestic violence advocacy on release. That service was really quite prompt, and I believe that it made a difference in starting my recovery. I was also referred to a peer mentoring service and the Thinking Skills Programme, the TSP, which I started when my MHTR had finished. The TSP was 15 to 16 sessions, for two hours each week, and they helped me to develop my problem-solving and interaction skills, as well as identify patterns in my behaviour that contributed to my offending—for example, recognising red flags. This worked after the mental health treatment because I was able to put into practice the skills and coping strategies that I had learned and use them with other groups and other people. I believe it set me up for the community.

Lord Blunkett: Thank you, that is very helpful. DeQeon?

DeQeon: Can you repeat the question?

Lord Blunkett: I am really asking about other services.

DeQeon: There is Turning Point and Action Homeless—I think that is the name—but the services are not joined together or aligned. There is too much disconnect between the police and all the other services. For me, I would say no.

Like I said, I was connected with Probation and with Revolving Doors, but it is not a service; it is a charity. I became involved with Revolving Doors through Probation, but, when it comes to homelessness or people who are going through drug issues, the only time you get requirements is through the court. Services need to be more connected; there needs to be more communication between them. I feel like there is a lot of like disconnect; the systems are not connected as one. I would say there were not a lot of services, and I did not get put through any of them by Probation.

Lord Blunkett: Pavan, from evidence across the board, do you get a feeling that it is pretty hit and miss as to whether the Probation Service is aware of local services and support that might be available?

Pavan Dhaliwal: Absolutely. It is very patchy. As my colleagues have said, it really depends on the individual and the extent to which they are willing to go above and beyond in finding out what those services are. The reality is that, during austerity, lots of those community-based services were cut, so it is more difficult to signpost at a local level.

The ideal for us in the Revolving Doors group, where we are concerned with unmet health and social need, is that if those services were in place at the first point of contact, people would be diverted into them then. But it is very patchy depending on which region you are in.

The Chair: Liz Sanderson, I think most of what you were going to ask has been covered.

Q84 **Baroness Sanderson of Welton:** Thanks, guys, for coming in; it is very much appreciated.

My question—on whether you are referred to other organisations and how useful that is—has been asked and answered. Obviously, Caroline, the agency was very useful for you, and it sounds as though the different organisations you were referred to helped.

Caroline: Communication was the key. My probation officer and myself and other services were all communicating with one another, which worked. Again, I had not experienced that before, but it stood out for me.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: I am going to ask another question.

Ayesha, without wishing to take you away from Revolving Doors—you clearly do brilliant work there, so I apologise in advance for this—you said you had looked at becoming a probation officer and thought maybe it was not for you. All three of you would obviously be terrific; you know what is needed. I am interested to hear what you thought about doing it yourselves, because you would be great.

Ayesha: Last year in college I did an access course in social science and human behaviour. I was hoping to go to university to do criminology. Now, I am actually trying to do my GCSEs to get to university.

The Chair: We all say good for you. We really admire you.

Ayesha: It is so I can have the knowledge, not just the experience, and maybe give something back and do something within the criminal justice system.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: You would be brilliant.

DeQeon, you said you need the lived experience and people who believe in you and who get it, but there are hurdles, in that maybe you have not had the opportunities.

It is not necessarily easy going to college and doing the study, but stick with it, Ayesha. You will be amazing.

Ayesha: Thank you.

DeQeon: As a child, life always revolved around crime from a young age. As a baby, I watched the home being raided. It was a normality for me. That was the environment I was in. I love politics and I would have loved to have had parents who were academics—I would have thrived in life. But I was given a set that was not good for me. People like me need to be in Probation, because we would change the system. It would make the system a lot better. We would not be sitting here today talking about this situation if people like us were probation officers.

The problem is the way the system is built. I am a criminal, and I have a criminal record, so now I cannot be a probation officer. I do not get clearance because of where I come from or who my family is. I could probably become a Lord but I would not get into the Cabinet. I would not get clearance, because I was given a bad set. That is the only problem with the system. It is like a brick wall that you have to knock down, and it is getting harder for people like us who are trying to better ourselves. It is flawed. It is hard out there if you come from what we have been given. I am not saying everybody comes from the same situation I have been through, but the hand I was given was a hard one. When people have been given the hard hand, you have to understand it.

We need to break down these walls. We need to peel back the layers of wallpaper and make it better. But that is not being done. We are listening and we are writing, and we are saying we are going to make a change, but there still has not been a change.

What member of the Cabinet has been in prison or been through the same situation I have? Not one of them has. How can we have people sitting in power who do not know how this actually works? They are trying to make policies and decisions but they do not have a clue. They just read things on a piece of paper and that is it. They do not get it because they have not been through it, if you understand what I mean. Sorry.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: No, that was very good, and very powerful and forceful. Well done.

Caroline: My aim is to work with others to help them turn their lives around too. However, due to my criminal record I have been pushed back quite a few times. It is so frustrating, because I have come such a long, long way, but because of something that happened years ago, when I was not very well, they say no. It is a shame.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: Yes, because you are all clearly ready to give back, and are doing so now—you are doing it.

Pavan Dhaliwal: On that point, you are entirely right. Our model is that we have our lived experience members, and we absolutely want them to move on to

employment. Who better to be working within these services than people like our members?

There is good practice in NHS England Health and Justice in getting people with lived experience into roles. With Probation, the will is there, and we have members who have secured jobs, but once it comes to clearance and vetting, we are talking seven, eight months in some instances that we have had to wait. In that time—

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: The will has gone, because you are being judged again, are you not?

Pavan Dhaliwal: Yes, absolutely.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: It feels like a knockback.

Pavan Dhaliwal: Also, people get typecast. Peer mentoring is vital. If each probation officer had a peer mentor attached, it would make their lives a lot easier as well. But we would not want people to be limited to that because they have lived experience. They should be able to become a fully-fledged probation officer, because it would really enhance the service and help rehabilitate people.

Lord Sandhurst: May I ask a short question when you have finished with Pavan?

The Chair: Yes, if Pavan has finished.

Lord Sandhurst: Is the distinction this? There are employers—indeed, Timpson is one which springs to mind—that make a point of trying to engage with and employ people with criminal records, but there are certain occupations where there is a barrier to entry because you have a criminal record.

DeQeon: Yes. I think that is the same for a lot of things in life. Once you have been blacklisted, that is it. It is very hard, and you have to fight to get up there. It is a hard world out there. A lot of the people who are employing have come from one set and not the other. I am not saying everybody needs to be from the same set; I am just saying that the experiences and the understanding are not there. Once they see a piece of paper that says, “Joe has done this and Joe has done that” and they have not met you in person, you are blacklisted—you are done. They are not going to look at you and say, “OK, Joe has done this and Joe has actually done quite well”. They see that, and that is it.

Sometimes, you can get to a certain point in the application process and you are able to talk to the person and explain what you are going through and what happened, and then, yes, I am going to pass. But when it comes to a piece of paper about DeQeon, the answer is no and I am passed to the side.

Ayesha: Even though we could study, go to university and pass our degree with big honours, having a criminal past means I carry a fear—and maybe others do—of what our DBS is going to say and how the employer is going to view it.

In my opinion, a holistic approach may be better. Instead of having DRR orders—DRR orders cost money, and that individual's rights are still taken away because they have been told they have to go to probation and other things—for someone who is a drug addict, put that money into treatment centres instead of sending them to courts and to drug agencies. Society has taken your will anyway, so use that money and put them into a treatment centre. Take them out of their environment and do the work from there.

The Chair: Pavan, you said that, if there is a job offer, by the time there is clearance, time has passed and the opportunity has gone. Is that because of DBS checks or is it because of clearances within organisations' own procedures?

Pavan Dhaliwal: It is a combination of the two. There were big backlogs in getting through clearance, but we have had a mixed picture. We have some former members who have been expedited, and they have managed to start their roles in a timely manner; but others, in that time, are still going to the jobcentre to say that they have secured a job but are still waiting for clearance. Obviously, the requirement is that they still need to be actively looking for roles. That is why I pointed to big institutions such as HMPPS and others; if the NHS can do things in a timely way and not put so many barriers in place through its health and justice services, it feels like there is learning that needs to be taken across.

The Chair: Thank you.

Baroness Meacher: Thank you, again, for coming. It is incredibly good of you and quite something for you to do, I think. Bless you.

Ayesha, we have talked an awful lot about probation officers and good characters and less good characters and so on, but do you feel overall that the community sentence has helped you, or not really?

Ayesha: I went over that question yesterday, and all I can say is, for myself, no. I felt it was an escape route to not be in prison so I could continue to use drugs, basically, and manipulate the system.

Baroness Meacher: That is quite illuminating. Thanks, Ayesha.

Caroline, what about you? Do you feel there was any positive benefit in having had that community sentence?

Caroline: Yes, I do. I wish I had had the MHTR a lot sooner in my life. I will say now that I am more able to manage my emotions and my feelings by using different coping strategies, and I have been able to address the underlying causes of my offending. I can honestly say that I have turned my life around.

DeQeon: I would say there were pros and cons; for me, it was like a social worker in a way, and I do not think I really needed them. I am not a criminal, I have never had that criminal intent; it was just the environment and the family that I was in at the time that got me into trouble and I had already got into trouble, so for me there

were pros and cons. It was like someone I had to go to, and if I did not go to see them, I would not say—

Baroness Meacher: I was thinking more of the requirements within the community sentence. Caroline, you mentioned the mental health treatment. Perhaps I can put it openly: what was the most helpful part of the community sentence for you?

Caroline: The Mental Health Treatment Requirement involved 12 sessions of emotional regulation treatment. Doing that and then going on to the TSP—the Thinking Skills Programme—the combination of the two worked.

Baroness Meacher: Whether they had to be within the context of a community sentence is the question for me. I feel someone who suffers with—

Caroline: I did not see the sentence as a punishment; I just saw it as a way to get better.

Baroness Meacher: A way to get the treatment you needed.

Caroline: Exactly, because nothing else was working for me; I was on my knees.

Baroness Meacher: Ayesha, addiction is a very difficult problem to deal with; you received the drug treatment in the end, did you not? Yes, you did.

Ayesha: Yes.

Baroness Meacher: Would you say that, at least, was a positive out of your community sentence?

Ayesha: I did not get that through my community sentence.

Baroness Meacher: Oh, did you not? Crikey. How did you get it then?

Ayesha: I did not get that through my community sentence; I got it by just going to the drug agency, being in my house in desperation and receiving a call from my drug worker, who had a bit more compassion than probation, and that opened up avenues for me. That was way after my community sentence ended.

Caroline: Can I just say something quickly? I had the MHTR. I felt that what was missing and what I needed, and what probably would have helped me further was the alcohol treatment requirement, because all my offences were related to alcohol. I had the mental health treatment; I just needed that Alcohol Treatment Requirement (ATR) as well, the combination of both.

Baroness Meacher: That is very helpful. Basically, treatment is what you needed and as long as the sentence provided those things, that would be helpful.

Ayesha, do you feel there is something that could have been offered to you within your community sentence that would have helped you?

Ayesha: The suggestion that I have just put along now is the holistic approach: instead of using the money to send us to courts or to this or that appointment, which all costs money, just send us to treatment centres.

DeQeon: If probation had a look at a lot of the offences that I committed—a lot of them were quite similar—they would have seen the root cause of that and dealt with it, and I would not have been in probation. They would have seen it: “Look, this is the issue; let us sort that out”. They never sorted that issue out; it was there on a piece of paper. If you look at what I have done—

Baroness Meacher: If I can ask you a straight question: do you feel the community sentence was helpful to you, in general terms?

DeQeon: It was a pain in the butt sometimes, in a way. I am not going to lie; I just felt like, “Oh, why? I have to go here today and I can’t be arsed to go there today”. I had to go because if I did not, I would be in breach, the police would knock at my door and I would be in the cell all morning under the magistrates for no reason, and then let out and have to walk home. For me, that is it.

Baroness Meacher: What would have helped you to get better if it had been included in the community sentence?

DeQeon: It is hard to say. There were a lot of issues: education, being able to do what made me happy; I like to perform, I like to act, I played rugby for a long time. If they had seen my hobbies and what made me happy or what made me not offend, and helped me get involved and do those kind of things that made me happy, probably a lot of the issues that I had would not have happened.

Baroness Meacher: I think I am getting from Caroline as regards the community sentence that the mental health treatment, particularly had it included alcohol treatment, would prevent you committing crimes in the future. I get the feeling that that has largely happened for you; even without the alcohol treatment, the mental health treatment is all you needed.

Caroline: On release from prison, there was a delay in starting the MHTR and, in that gap, I went downhill a little and went back to old behaviours.

Baroness Meacher: Ayesha, would you say the drug treatment has helped you not to commit crimes in the future, albeit the drug treatment did not actually come through the community sentence?

Ayesha: Through Probation?

Baroness Meacher: No, through the community sentencing.

Ayesha: What has made me today has not been through Probation.

Baroness Meacher: So just the treatment and not to do with the community sentence, basically.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: DeQeon, you did the RAR—the Rehabilitation Activity Requirement—which you said, frankly, was not much use. I am not always clear what they involve.

DeQeon: I am not either. I did not know what a RAR day was either; they said, “You have to do seven RAR days”.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: What did you do?

DeQeon: Louise used to do badminton once a week; they would class that as a RAR day. I did not know what a RAR day was; I still do not know what a RAR day is. It said on the community order that I was required to have seven RAR days; what are RAR days? There is no explanation or context of what a RAR day is, just that you have to do seven days of RAR.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: What else did you do apart from badminton?

DeQeon: I cannot really remember; it was a group thing and I had to go there once a week and talk about certain things. It was not memorable so it was not that great.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: Were you happy to talk and discuss?

DeQeon: Yes, I love talking, and talking is so therapeutic for me to express myself.

Baroness Meacher: Was there anything in your community sentence that you think might have helped you to stop committing crimes?

DeQeon: I was not committing; like I said, I was on a community order for a long time. It was not because I was committing or offending; it was because, at the time, probation was not understanding that I was in hospital for over a year after a car crash. When I came out, I did not give the probation officer a sick note so I was in breach and was taken back to court and I received extra on my community order.

There was no understanding again; I had just been in hospital for over a year. I was not offending, it was just certain things, like I might have missed a probation meeting so I would be in breach, and would get taken back to court and given extra months. I was not offending, I was just not meeting up with the probation officer because of the circumstances that I was in at the time; I did not have anywhere to live, or could not get the bus, or had had an argument with my mum.

You have to understand the things people are sometimes going through at that time: they do not want to go all the way into town, some people have agoraphobia, people do not want to go through town when they are not feeling very well or very good in their mind. Then with extra days, again, it was not offending, it was just that I was not going and meeting or communicating, but I could not—I was going through a hard time at that time, so talking to a probation officer was the last thing I wanted to do.

The Chair: When you were in hospital, were you in touch with the probation officer? There were times when you could not be, but were facilities made

available?

DeQeon: At that time, no. I have been in hospital twice. The whole year I was in hospital, Louise came to see me but that was voluntary; she was not my probation officer at that time. I do not think a probation officer came to see me in hospital even once at that time, so no, I do not think the facilities were made available to me; I was in hospital and I was a less important case.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: Both Caroline and Ayesha want to complete the last question on RAR days.

Caroline: I forgot to add at the start that I had 30 days RAR, I do apologise for that. That included peer mentoring, alcohol recovery services, AA; just to give you an idea, those were the sorts of things I did.

Ayesha: I remember the RAR days too, and it did not work. I cannot remember what the requirement was for RAR days but it was all calculated. Given somebody whose life is unmanageable and in a state of disrepair, all this information adds up to a 37-hour a week job. When it is all calculated, you are given a report and you have to make a total of hours and at the end it adds up to 37 hours. That is how it was given.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: RARs are used quite a lot so when they are helpful, great, but if you do not know—

Ayesha: How is an individual who is a reckless or hopeless drug addict going to keep to 37 hours a week? It does not make sense.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton: No, that is a fair point. It does not work.

Q85 **Lord Beith:** Two of you have referred to the delay in starting the provisions of the community sentence. Obviously, it is more significant if the community sentence is actually going to do good and make a difference, but is that a danger zone where the risk of reoffending is high, from your experience?

DeQeon: Can I start? You said a delay; there is not a delay. If you are on bail for an offence, you are actually required to see probation more than when you have a community order; you have to check in with them once a week. There is not a delay; there is just a delay on what you have been sentenced with. It is actually more intense when you are on bail than when you have a community order. If I am on bail for an offence, they will want to see me once a week; I will have to check in to a probation officer and talk to them, they have to know what is going on.

There is probably not a lot of work on what you need to deal with like anger management; they are not dealing with the root cause, they just want to check in and want to know what is going on. If you do not meet that check-in, you are in breach. So I find it is more intense when you have not been sentenced; you have to check in, you have to be there.

Lord Beith: Post sentence?

DeQeon: Yes.

Lord Beith: If the provisions that are part of your community sentence are very slow to come into operation, you have to wait a long time for them; is that a dangerous period?

Caroline: Yes, because I relapsed back to my old behaviour in that time that I had to wait for it. When I came out, I was on my own, I had nobody, I had no support whatever, and I just did not know what to do.

Q86 **Lord Filkin:** Thank you very much indeed for giving evidence. I remember when I first gave evidence to a Commons committee; I was pretty terrified. You do not appear terrified at all. I am going to ask you a simple question; did your community sentence feel like a punishment? Shall we go in the usual order? Ayesha, would you like to start?

Ayesha: Did my community sentence feel like a punishment? The process of being in court and in the court cells felt like a punishment, but for me, back then, knowing that I could continue to support a problem, the reward that I wanted was a community sentence. I knew I could still continue to use drugs in the community and maybe secretly still commit crimes, so it was not something that I would adhere to. It was a get-out-of-jail card to me; it was something that I could still see I could support my habit with, and it was not enough to enforce change within me.

Lord Filkin: It is very clear, and you mentioned earlier: what would have been a better order that would have helped you get off drugs and stop offending?

Ayesha: The one that I have said and suggested, maybe the holistic approach, a treatment centre, being taken out of my environment and not put in prison, and not have so many appointments and groups that I have to attend. The main thing I was interested in was waking up to be able to have a bag of gear each morning; that was my first thought as an addict. It would have helped to have been taken out of my area without any choice to a treatment centre where I would be around people that had compassion, understanding, and were willing to address problems. Being left in society just made my problem even worse.

Lord Filkin: That is very clear and very useful evidence indeed. Caroline, did your community sentence feel like a punishment?

Caroline: It did; knowing that each day I could get sent to prison if I did not meet the requirements of the judge. However, as I said earlier, I really saw it as a way to get better; I saw the mental health treatment and I thought, "At last".

The Chair: Was it the way the mental health treatment was presented to you that made you look at it that way?

Caroline: The mental health treatment helped me to deal with my emotions and my feelings and being able to interact and communicate with others. I struggled with that; that is why I had 12 sessions of emotional regulation treatment.

Lord Filkin: From what I recollect, you also said it would have been better if the alcohol treatment had been at the same time.

Caroline: Yes; I definitely would have benefited from a combined order.

Baroness Meacher: Do you know why the alcohol treatment was not prescribed at the same time as the mental health treatment?

Caroline: No. I was quite surprised by that as time went on and I came to know what services there were. Every time I was in trouble it was alcohol-related and, if I am honest, I have had problems with alcohol for a number of years.

Lord Filkin: DeQeon, did the sentence feel like a punishment?

DeQeon: For me, yes, it felt like a punishment. I did not feel like I was an offender; I just had a lot of issues like my home and my relationship with my parents. It was not that I was an offender, but certain things happened and then I got a community order. I felt like I was not an offender—I did not go out to commit crime in the community; I had domestics at home with my family; that was what the issue was.

For me, it felt like a punishment because if this situation had been dealt with, and relationships with my parents or my home life, those kinds of things, I do not think I would have had to do a community order. It was just a recurrent and ongoing thing from a young age to an adult, the relationship at home, my home life; it was not the best. So it felt like a punishment because I felt I was a good person in society. If I had a good environment or a better home—but let us not say I came from a bad home; the situations I went through at that time were not the best. If I had a better home life and more stability, I probably would not have had a community order, so yes, I did feel like it was a punishment.

Lord Filkin: Without wanting to put words in any of your mouths, I get quite a sense from all of you that if you had had earlier access to appropriate treatment centres, that could have made it easier to have a change in your lives earlier and to stop offending. Is that true or are there other things as well that we should be hearing?

DeQeon: Mine was not drug-related so it was not a treatment area; my offences were not drug-related. I had issues at an early age—certain things that happened in my life that, as a kid, affected me greatly—and it was not acknowledged. I had certain problems like dyslexia that were not noticed at a young age at school. A lot of my issues were rooted at school and they were not noticed very early; they were noticed too late.

Certain things, like I said, family issues, that were nothing to do with me, happened and affected me as a young person. If they were noticed at an early age and had been dealt with at that time, when I was younger, probably a lot of the stuff that happened when I was older would not have happened.

Ayesha: I have forgotten the question.

Lord Filkin: I was commenting that there was a general theme that many of you felt that earlier access to an appropriate form of treatment centre would have been beneficial. Is that correct and is there anything else that you think would have helped you to have turned your lives around earlier?

Ayesha: At that point, no. The treatment centre, the holistic approach; I would say that would be a good suggestion of something to do. But within the probation service back then, I could not see any option of the support that they were giving me that would make me think, “Do you know what? I want to turn my life around”. They did not enforce me to want to turn my life around by the support that I felt I was given from them, so I would say no.

Caroline: The mental health treatment requirement actually worked for me. Over the years, I had struggled with depression and anxiety, but the mental health support that I needed but could not get was because of my drinking. I was drinking because of my mental health, so it was a vicious circle.

Q87 Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia: Thank you all very much indeed for coming today. I have found what you have told us illuminating and humbling and, without wanting to sound patronising, I congratulate all of you on making something of your lives after what you have been through; it is truly impressive.

Just to share with anybody else who may be listening to this; we do not know and nor do we want to know what crimes you may have committed. The question I am asking is a bit far-reaching; we would like to know whether your sentence has helped repair the damage or potential damage to any of the victims of the crime.

DeQeon: Like I said, a lot of my offences were relationships with my parents and my family, so no and yes because I have the same relationship with my parents now as I did then. My offences were not really like that so I cannot really answer that question.

Caroline: If it is okay, I would like to miss that question please. I have contributed back to society; however, when it comes to the victims, I just do not want to—

Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia: The question is: have you been able to repair the harm to the person or people, or to the institution or whatever?

Caroline: Yes; by not doing it again.

Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia: Yes, that is partially answering by looking forwards, but by looking backwards?

Caroline: I am now encouraging and helping others to make positive changes in their lives. I am actually part of the NHS MHTR Working and Oversight Group, so I helped to design the MHTR. I have also written an MHTR blog for the NHS website, again to show positivity, that it can be done, it can be changed. I have also taken part in the NHS MHTR procurement. I have done a lot of work and still am doing a lot of work around the MHTR, so they know I am useful for something.

The Chair: That is exactly what we meant by the question, because it is the whole of society as well.

Caroline: As I say, I want to encourage others, and I am doing that through my work with the MHTR.

The Chair: That must be very satisfying.

Caroline: It is, yes.

Ayesha: Have I made a contribution or made amends to society? Every single day that I wake up clean, I am making amends to society. No longer causing pain or harm to myself or other individuals is making amends to myself, society and my family. Today, I study, I go to college, I carry love in my heart. I am honest, open, and willing to learn.

I have had to make a 360-degree turn in my life: I am very passionate about London—I am a London woman—but I no longer live in London: I live in a seaside town in north Somerset. That was not a choice I made easily. Within my heart is the desire to give back to community, I am passionate about justice, and I am passionate about change. The meetings I go to, to help me abstain and aid my recovery, have given me the tools to continue to do this today. I know I will go to my grave as an addict, but a recovered addict. I will leave it there.

The Chair: Thank you. Lord Beith?

Lord Beith: I have nothing to add, because the question about probation officers has already been answered fully.

The Chair: I will go to Lord Sandhurst.

Q88 **Lord Sandhurst:** Looking back to where you were at the beginning of your last order, if you had been asked what would you like to do as an activity, or had been given some say in it, what do you think you would have said?

Do you understand the question?

Caroline: Could you repeat it, please?

Lord Sandhurst: If we go back to the beginning of your last community order, you have all said that you were not asked to engage—about what you would like to do, what activities and so on. What do you think you would have asked for?

Caroline: I did not have the alcohol treatment requirement, so I would have asked to attend regular recovery meetings and relapse prevention groups. I did actually do that as part of my RAR days and I referred myself to a relapse prevention group but there needed to be more support around alcohol.

Lord Sandhurst: Ayesha, thinking about how you were at that point, not the person you are now but the person you were then, your community order said you had to turn up once a week or whatever; did it also connect you with a drug agency?

Baroness Meacher: No, I do not think it did, because that was separate.

Lord Sandhurst: So that person came back later because you were still in touch with them? My understanding was that you did have some contact with a drug agency; is that right?

Ayesha: I had contact with a drug agency before the cases came up. I could go to Turning Point or whatever agency it was, to get substitute medication. Once I had been in court, probation enforced my attendance at that agency anyway.

Lord Sandhurst: Then the order finished?

Ayesha: Yes, and then the order finished, but I still continued—

Lord Sandhurst: Could I just recap what I think your evidence was earlier? During the time of the order, although you were seeing the drug agency, you were continuing to do drugs.

Ayesha: Yes.

Lord Sandhurst: Sorry; I just wanted to make sure the history was right. Once the order had finished, because you had been in touch with the drug agency all along, even though you were still doing drugs, they kept in touch with you and you then engaged with them.

Ayesha: Yes. I was not consistent in making phone calls to my drug worker or in getting my methadone, then there came a day in my life when I made a cry for help. We had a phone call where she gave me so many suggestions and then she said to me, “How about treatment”?

Lord Sandhurst: But if you had not had that contact with her at the beginning, that ending would never have happened?

Ayesha: Yes, but I want to make clear that it did not happen through Probation.

Lord Sandhurst: It was because you started with that particular drug agency before you were put on probation.

Ayesha: Yes. I was a heroin addict and I was not able to supply myself with £10 to buy a bag of gear every day. I used to have methadone substitute to get me through certain days, so I always had connections with a drug agency. When I was on probation, they just enforced my attendance.

Lord Sandhurst: If we look at the beginning of that community order, was there anything else that you wish you had asked for and which you were not given?

Ayesha: No.

Lord Sandhurst: So, getting off drugs was the big thing.

Ayesha: Yes, but it was not just about getting off drugs.

Lord Sandhurst: It was about changing your lifestyle.

Ayesha: Yes. It is not that the drug agencies are going to give you methadone and your life is going to be “woo”. It does not work like that.

Lord Sandhurst: I understand that.

Ayesha: You still have a problem.

Lord Sandhurst: Yes. DeQeon, when you started your last community order, if they had asked you what activity you would like to do, what do you think you would have said?

DeQeon: I do not know. I really wanted to go to college and to get GCSEs. Education was the key for me. It was just so hard to get into what I wanted to do because of certain circumstances that I was going through at the time, such as not having a place to live. Stability was the main, key thing I needed in my life. Education is not for everybody but, for me, it is the key.

Lord Sandhurst: I was looking at you personally because what is right for you will not be right for someone else.

DeQeon: Yes, that is true. I feel like you need a lot of guidance sometimes. I would not be able to say what activities I wanted because everybody has different hobbies and pleasures and everybody has different needs. At the time, I wanted education, guidance, and stability.

Lord Sandhurst: I think I can ask you this—I do not think it goes into anything private. How old were you at that time?

DeQeon: It has been an ongoing issue from when I was 13 until I was about 21 or 22.

Lord Sandhurst: When was the last order?

DeQeon: The last order was in 2020, so three years ago. I am 26, so I was 23 or 22.

Lord Sandhurst: You are now 25 or 26.

DeQeon: Yes, I am 26 years old.

Lord Sandhurst: I am just trying to get a picture.

Lord Blunkett: This question follows entirely from what Lord Sandhurst has asked. Pavan, in the work you are doing, how often do you come across a situation where education is a referral, or it should have been?

Pavan Dhaliwal: To be honest with you, Lord Blunkett, people rarely say “I was referred to this and it has been a game-changer for me”. It tends to be, as you have heard, that the relationship with the probation officer is itself the intervention. Most of our members have high educational aspirations, but that is part of the

journey around rehabilitation once the underlying, unmet needs are met and people are working through it. There are lots of charities like ours which will then facilitate education. However, you must understand that we are not working with people who have a historic experience; we are working with people currently in the system. This is all part of the recovery journey, and education will absolutely factor into that.

I would like to make a point, along the lines of what my colleagues have already said, about people being employed within probation. Once a community sentence is given, at that point it is really vital that a peer supporter worker is assigned to the individual, because if you have already been in the system, you know how to navigate it and then you are also more able to navigate the services. This also assists probation in terms of its caseloads and the pressure it is under. If you genuinely want a person to succeed, having that in place is really, really important.

Caroline: Can I just say that my peer mentor actually helped me with education? She referred me on to courses, she encouraged and empowered me to take on new challenges, and part of that was education.

Q89 Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia: Those of you who struggled between the ages of being a child and being an adult, was there a hiatus in the treatment or help or anything else you got? Did you feel there was a break, or a different attitude to you when you were younger? I think DeQeon, you said that you started off when you were 13.

DeQeon: Definitely, because if you have family who have been through the system and you have probation officers and people who work for the police who know who you are from your last name, you are going to be treated a certain way just because of your name. So yes, I feel like I was targeted; I was noticed because of my last name, and they blacklisted me. They did not know me but they would say, "Oh yeah, he's a so-and-so", and that would be it: they had already written me off from the start, without even getting to know what I had been through, what had happened, and the whole story. They would always say, "Yeah, we know what he's like; we know what's going to come from that. We know his story".

So, from a young age, I have always been looked at as being this kind of character but really and truly I was never like that. That was not me. I was just given a name and came from an environment with a family who had a name. I always felt that I never got the chance to express myself because they had written me off from that start: they saw that name and said, "We know what he's like. He is going to be just like so-and-so". That is the issue: if you have a system with a lot of people who have certain family members and probation officers who know them, they are going to write people off and they are not going to give people a chance. Do you know what I am saying?

Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia: I understand. What age were you when the guardian angel entered your life?

DeQeon: The guardian angel came into my life when I was about, I think, 20 years old, so six years ago.

Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia: It was a long time before she arrived.

DeQeon: Yes. She came at the right time. It took me a long time to get to where I am, and I will tell you, she was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I will keep praising her name. She is a special lady, and a special probation officer. I would not say anything good about probation apart from Louise. She made me see the light in probation; if it was not for her, I would be sitting here saying a lot of bad things about it, but I will praise it because of her. She was the best. She should be sitting behind the table and answering these questions.

The Chair: Well, you are here and your evidence is very compelling.

DeQeon: I hope so. You should get in contact with her.

The Chair: Caroline and Ayesha, do you want to say anything in response to Fiona's question about a particular turning point, a hiatus, or a gap?

Caroline: As a child I witnessed traumatic events and obviously that affected me throughout my life. However, my problems did not start to show until I started drinking in my mid-twenties, so I started to offend quite late. That was when it became apparent that I had mental health issues that needed to be addressed. They had been going on for too long and I had been covering it all with alcohol.

The Chair: Ayesha, is there anything you would like to add?

Ayesha: I would just like to say, maybe I grew up in a bit of a dysfunctional family, but I never thought, "Oh yes, I am going to be an addict".

Today, yes, I am an addict, and I have to do daily maintenance to stay clean every single day. There is no day off. It is something I will have to live with for the rest of my life. I have to check in with how I think and feel on a daily basis, otherwise I get sick very quickly. I will leave it there.

Baroness Prashar: My question is for you, Pavan. Over the years you have been with Revolving Doors—I do not know how long that is—have you seen the probation service evolve for better or for worse? In addition, from your point of view, what makes a good probation officer?

Pavan Dhaliwal: I came back into criminal justice two years ago when, after over a decade in human rights, I joined Revolving Doors, so I remember Probation from the period before. In the mid period, there was the TR programme and the fallout that came from that. Now we have a reunified service.

I am pleased that, particularly because of Revolving Doors and the people we work with, IOM—integrated offender management—has now been reintroduced in a more serious way in terms of looking at a particular cohort.

As part of our evidence, we submitted a probation inquiry we carried out last year where we talked to probation practitioners as well as people with lived experience. The principles that make a good probation officer are there in the job description; they are as they have been described by Ayesha, Caroline and DeQeon. What we are hearing from the ground is that there is lots of really good, positive intent when people enter probation, but caseloads, reforms, overhaul and upheaval, lack of resourcing and problems with recruitment are all making a huge impact. If you look at the examples from youth justice, the outcomes are better because of the sort of caseloads that people are dealing with there. There was a time when Probation was not under the same pressures that it is under today, and the impact of austerity is well documented. Probation is now trying to find its feet again, and this will take time because it is a new service, as it were. Ultimately, however, those underlying issues still need to be dealt with. We have an opportunity to think about peer support and how that is integrated into the service, and getting the basics right. We started the session talking about pre-sentence reports: ensuring that probation officers are well trained and qualified to do those basics is absolutely vital. They should also develop relationships with other services.

There are some pockets of good practice—IOM is a good example—where the different agencies are working together in a really intense way, particularly when you are working with a cohort of people where the drivers around poverty, trauma and discrimination are playing out through substance misuse and mental health issues. Ultimately, these people should be diverted out of the criminal justice system at the earliest opportunity.

There is positive intent, and the will is there, but the probation practitioners we spoke to said that their caseloads were too great to give person centred, intensive support. It is just not possible with the way they are currently operating.

The Chair: I would like to ask DeQeon one very narrow question. You were talking about when you were in a hospital and you came up before the court for “breach” because you missed appointments. Were you given a chance to explain what had happened?

DeQeon: Not really. I had a really bad accident, a bad car crash, and I spent a whole year in hospital. It was very traumatic, one of the biggest things that ever happened to me in my life. I went through a lot and when I came out of hospital, going to get sick notes, answering the phone—

The Chair: I am really interested in whether you could actually explain that to the court.

DeQeon: My solicitor explained it to the court very well, but I was still taken back to court again. So, it was explained properly by my solicitor, but not by Probation because Probation were the ones who breached me.

The Chair: It was your role that I was interested in.

Let me just see if any of the members have any further questions. No. Is there anything more any of you would like to add to what we have heard? You have been very, very clear and it has all been very powerful and helpful.

DeQeon: I would like to say one thing: I feel we need to get more people in the House of Lords and the House of Commons who have lived experience. The percentage of people that come from one walk of life is too high. We cannot have people making policies who have not been through the system themselves. If we had people who had been through the system, I feel that the world, or let us say the UK, would be a better place. That is it, really. Thank you.

The Chair: That is why we have sessions like this, and it is not just to do with courts and criminal justice and all the rest of it. Over the years, we have all been in sessions where we have heard from people who have gone through, or are going through, different experiences.

DeQeon: Listening and hearing are different things to knowing. When you have somebody sitting on the other side of the fence who has actually been there and knows what it feels like, we are going to make a better, more positive change.

The Chair: Let me just ask Pavan from Revolving Doors, is there anything more you would like to say?

Pavan Dhaliwal: I would like to make a point about the importance of dual diagnosis. Combined orders can be made, but very few are. I am not sure whether that came up in your session with the Sentencing Council.

The thresholds for support are important as well. There are treatment orders and things in place that can make a difference, but they need to be used and they need to be prescribed in a timely manner. There needs to be wrap-around peer support as well.

I would really like to emphasise that dual diagnosis point.

The Chair: That is very helpful. We have heard about a particular order in Ireland which can include education, for instance, but I do not want to start off another discussion.

Ayesha: Through my own personal experience so far, a lot of action has to take place for any changes to be made. That is how things can be changed, with action. I will leave it there. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, and all the very best for the future.