



Justice and Home Affairs Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Community sentences

Tuesday 4 July 2023

10.30 am

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Baroness Hamwee (The Chair); Lord Blunkett; Baroness Chakrabarti; Baroness Meacher; Baroness Prashar; Lord Sandhurst.

Evidence Session No. 8

Heard in Public

Questions 90 – 103

Witnesses

[I](#): Carrie Peters, Director of Operations, Ingeus Justice Services; Rebecca Robson, Senior Officer, Women's Community Matters (Cumbria); Niki Scordi, CEO, Advance Charity.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witnesses

Carrie Peters, Rebecca Robson and Niki Scordi.

Q90 The Chair: Good morning, and welcome to the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee, and a particular welcome to our witnesses today in our inquiry on community sentences. Our witnesses are Carrie Peters from Ingeus Justice Services, Rebecca Robson from Women's Community Matters—I like the double meaning of that—and Niki Scordi from Advance.

We have apologies from Lord Beith, Lord Filkin and Lord McInnes of Kilwinning, Baroness Henig, Baroness Sanderson of Welton and Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia. Lord Blunkett is online.

I am sorry that there are fewer than usual of us here, but we still have plenty of questions for you. We have heard from users by experience, as one calls them these days, about how they experience the referral process, and from others working in the system. Your organisations deliver services to people who are on probation, so we are interested to hear from you how the referral process works in practice.

Carrie Peters: I have worked in the justice sector for over 30 years. In our experience, referral processes need to be as simple and as quick as possible to give busy practitioners the time to be able to make the referrals they need to make. Refer and monitor is an effective system, but it could certainly be simplified. For some of the contracts, particularly personal well-being, practitioners need to decide on the complexities, the different pathways and the desired outcomes. Without an in-depth assessment of all those things, that can be really difficult. It can put off referrals and lead to inaccuracies.

If, after our in-depth assessment, we realise that they need to be on different pathways or they have a higher level of complexity, we need to go back to them, sometimes for an amendment and sometimes to cancel the referral or for a re-referral, which takes an awful lot of time. It means that people do not get their needs met in the way we want to meet them.

If there was a system whereby the basic information came through to us as a provider, we carried out the in-depth assessment, spoke about the outcomes and the complexity and what needs doing in an action plan based on that, that would be a lot simpler. It would encourage more referrals and cut down on all that toing and froing. Of course, if we had access to authority systems, it would be even simpler.

The Chair: We will come to that. Thank you.

Niki Scordi: I agree with Carrie, but I would add that referrals work best when women consent to that referral, a service is explained to them and they are ready to engage. That is often not the case. A referral is made to us, but the woman does not really understand what she is coming to. She does not understand the service and what the benefit would be to her. I agree that we have to have very speedy referrals with minimal information where we engage with that woman directly, or that much

more work needs to be done by probation practitioners, but, given the time constraints, that is always very difficult.

The other issue for us is quality of information. Basic information like accurate contact details and the ability to engage with the woman is hindered. We will talk later about the timings of that and the implications, but the referral process is a complex process for what could be a very much simpler way forward.

Rebecca Robson: In Cumbria, it is generally working well, and we are getting quality referrals. We have developed relationships between Probation staff and our staff, which is resulting in good referrals. As my colleagues have mentioned, it is getting live information about risk that presents us with a challenge. One thing we like is that women can be referred more than once on this system, which is really helpful. Probation staff can see the progress that the women are making and then make subsequent referrals, if that is appropriate.

The Chair: You said they work best when it happens quickly and when the client has given consent. We have heard that things go rather slowly and, from some witnesses, that consent is not sought—certainly not informed consent—and that it is something of a tick box exercise. I can see two of you are nodding. Does that sound familiar to you?

Niki Scordi: Yes, it does. Many women do not understand the difference between probation services and our service as an independent voluntary sector service. That is a really important difference, because we bring something different to the table and for their experience. Engagement with the women takes a lot longer than the expected 10 days. In order for it to be trauma-informed, in order for there to be informed consent, a trusted relationship needs to be built, which is not often part of the referral process or the system. It is very systems-driven rather than relationship and person-centric.

The Chair: Let me wrap something else up into this. We have also heard it expressed that Probation is the judge in sentencing, that the magistrates do what Probation says should be done without interposing much thought. If you have encountered that, does that mean that clients come to you with a not very helpful predisposition towards Probation?

Carrie Peters: Preparation for the services that people are referred into is really important, and a lot of probation practitioners do their best with that, but we know that there are pressures on people in the Probation Service.

It can be particularly confusing for men's services, because the services are commissioned separately and they can be sent off to different places, to different organisations, for different needs. Sometimes they turn up and do not know what they have been referred for, which is confusing.

Q91 Baroness Prashar: I want to explore a little how you work with the Probation Service. What services do you share with them and what information do you expect

them to share with you?

Carrie Peters: We work closely with the probation practitioners. Obviously, that relationship is key to supporting the person on probation. We share a lot of information with them through many different mediums. We put things on their intranet, we attend their meetings, we attend their training, particularly new people coming in on the PQiP training and induction, and we share lots of information with them about the individuals, both on refer and monitor and via email, phone calls and three-ways, that sort of thing.

In terms of what they share with us, we get a lot of information at the referral stage. As we have said, that is sometimes not complete, which can be difficult. The biggest difficulty for us is that risk and need are dynamic, as we know, and often we do not pick up those changes as we go along, even practical changes like someone having moved address or having a different officer, and we can be trying to get hold of someone without the correct information. It is very difficult. Access to the authority systems OASys and nDelius would put us in a better position for keeping abreast of all those changes as we go along. We could also record directly on to those systems, which would also save probation practitioners time.

The Chair: OASys and nDelius are the IT systems.

Carrie Peters: They are the authority systems, yes.

Niki Scordi: Similarly, I would say that we work best when we have regular and direct communication with the probation practitioners, particularly for women for whom there are specialist practitioners who understand the needs of that woman and build a one-to-one relationship with our key worker in that area. It is very rare at this point. Some regions have set that up, and that is where we see the best results. Some regions that are newer to having specialist women's services have not got there. You might have one practitioner who only works with one or two women and does not understand the differences, so the quality of the initial assessment that they will do might be limited. Sometimes, the risk assessment is not there or comes afterwards.

As Carrie was saying, as we build that trusting relationship, the woman can share much more about her needs, but the most challenging thing is that the system and the way it has been designed does not allow for that flexibility. It is very much set at the beginning. It is very rare that we can add dynamically when her needs or her priorities change so that she feels she has some control and some say in what is happening. It is often designed around rehabilitation days, and I know we will have more questions on that.

Rebecca Robson: In two of our centres, we have Probation staff who are based in the centre one or two days a week, which works really well. The information sharing works really well, including about the ongoing risk. On the days when that does not happen, it makes it much more challenging to share information, because, again, we do not have access to those live systems. There have been occasions when

difficulties have occurred because things were happening that we had no knowledge of. We are good at sharing lots of information with Probation staff, including case studies and feedback from clients about their experience the journey and engagement with the services.

Baroness Prashar: You hinted at the fact that it is not a dynamic and flexible exchange. Do you get the opportunity to give feedback? Have you made suggestions about how that might be improved?

Niki Scordi: Yes, we have given feedback to the particular practitioner about a woman. Again, where the relationship is working well, we can go back and say that she has disclosed this, or that she is talking to us about that. With Probation, regionally and nationally, the journey over the last two years has been really positive. It has moved forward, and we can engage at the level of senior and central probation teams, as well as regionally, to see some adaptation. Change is slow. The challenge with long-term contracts is that they are often fixed and there is an unwillingness to flex them sufficiently until they are renewed. So there are positives, but also barriers, to that.

Carrie Peters: In terms of best practice, where we can co-locate with Probation, certainly for men's services, certainly some of the time, that really aids the relationship and helps with getting a better understanding of changing needs and how we can work together to support the person.

Baroness Prashar: You both said that the risk assessment is not always available or is late. Why do you think that is the case?

Niki Scordi: For us, it is due to the number of probation practitioners and their caseloads and capacity. This particular service, which is an update from before, was designed for an in-depth assessment based on what the probation practitioner is doing in a long and strong relationship with the woman. However, because of capacity, the time is not there, so it acts as a barrier rather than a positive. It relies on us as a service to provide that, but the system is not designed for us to have that flexibility to respond or to adjust it. We have to go back to practitioners at all times.

Carrie Peters: There is also some concern about sharing too much information, and about GDPR. We have spoken to probation practitioners who worry about sharing too much, but if we are working with people we need to understand the risks and restrictions so that we can work well together. There is more work to be done on that to really understand what can and should be shared.

Q92 **Baroness Prashar:** What services do you provide to people serving community orders?

Rebecca Robson: For us, the most important thing is how we deliver our services, not what we deliver. We deliver our services with love, care, compassion and kindness, and that is what we focus on from the start. In our application for the contract, there was a little surprise about that, but some of the things we do are similar to other places. We run an eight-week group course called Women's First,

which each week responds to a different pathway to reoffending, or a different vulnerability or issue, and women find the peer support on that really helpful. We have confidence-building courses called Beautiful Women and Beautiful Me, which are available to all women, including women who are accessing the service on this contract. We have a range of one-to-one support from lots of different skilled practitioners, including independent domestic violence advisers and mental health workers.

We have courses that are specific to domestic abuse and the effects on the woman and her family; different peer support groups; social activities that help with reintegration back into the community and with making meaningful and purposeful friendships that perhaps help them to make better life choices; activities that support mental health improvement; different coping strategies such as mindfulness and grounding; and a range of practical support like a clothes bank, access to free toiletries, baby supplies and a crisis fund.

We have warm hub spaces, particular drop-in and craft sessions, employment and education and training support, volunteer opportunities, a range of training, access to specialist support, survivor network groups, social enterprise opportunities, lots of one-off events and activities, and access to specialists to support and unpaid work placements.

Baroness Prashar: That is quite a list. I will come back to it.

Niki Scordi: Advance's model is slightly different. It is focused primarily on a one-to-one relationship with a dedicated key worker, our Minerva community care worker. Particularly at the beginning, we feel that it is the best way because it builds a trusting relationship, really focusing on the individual and building positive regard, as Rebecca was saying. We tend to do that right through her journey with us. Then, as she develops a relationship with us, she will also be able to engage in groups and activities.

We have 13 women's centres across the regions we work with that are safe spaces where she can connect with other women who are going through similar experiences. We have partners who are specialists in mental health support, emotional well-being, domestic abuse and violence, which is one need that is not clearly identified on the system but is very much a priority for the women. Particularly now with poverty and the cost of living, we have a lot of finance and debts needs, and we are doing one-to-one sessions on that and on employability.

We have access to peer mentors, other women, like the women you have met, who have lived experience, who, once they have completed their time and do not need that support, will come back and volunteer to help others, which has a really positive impact on them. I will talk a little later about the detail of the courses.

Carrie Peters: We deliver services to men as part of commissioned rehabilitative services across six regions. We deliver education, training and employment, accommodation, finance, benefit and debt support, as well as personal well-being,

which covers four different pathways: family and significant others, social inclusion, emotional well-being, and lifestyle and associates. We also deliver dependency and recovery services that support people to engage with treatment services. There is quite a range. We deliver in groups and one to one, we provide mentoring, and we work with a wide range of voluntary sector partners who bring in different specialisms that complement the work we do.

Like Rebecca, we at Ingeus are really focused on the way we deliver. We always put the person on probation at the centre and design services around them. Our services are trauma-informed. First and foremost, we have to make sure that people feel safe to engage with us, have choice and feel empowered. We consider culture, and we operate using all those trauma-informed principles.

In terms of peer mentoring, lived experience is at the heart of what we do. I would like to talk a bit later about our Ingeus academy, because we have a really good programme where, through peer mentoring, we bring people into paid work with us, and there is nothing more powerful than sitting in front of someone and saying, "If I can do it, so can you".

Baroness Prashar: Which of these services is in greatest demand, and where do you have spare capacity?

Carrie Peters: For us, accommodation is in the greatest demand. We have really high referrals. Our service is to provide accommodation support to support people into accommodation; we do not have our own accommodation. There is an awful lot of demand for that service. There is capacity in some of the other services because of the referral issues.

Niki Scordi: For Advance, referrals are often much higher than we were expecting—25% to 75% more. We sometimes have waiting lists for just engaging with a dedicated key worker. We will see them at the beginning, but for building that one-to-one relationship we sometimes have waiting lists. We have done a lot to reduce that, but it has been challenging.

The other area for us is mental health and counselling. We find that women's highest level of need is in mental health, and there is a real shortage and no specific funding for that. There is a shortage of domestic abuse support where that domestic abuse is not high risk, and we rely on local services that are already overstretched. Advance is also a domestic abuse charity, so we understand the challenges of providing that support. There is a lot of demand in those areas.

Rebecca Robson: We see an awful lot of demand from women in crisis, which is when something happens in their life and they need support straightaway, particularly one-to-one support. We have a dedicated crisis room where they can feel safe and access support throughout the day and the week.

The Chair: This rather counterbalances, not in a good way, the need for speed. You made the point earlier about the importance of having a quick referral and getting

on with it.

Q93 Lord Sandhurst: I think it was Niki in particular, although others may have endorsed this, who talked about practitioners being worried about sharing too much information. Was it Carrie?

Carrie Peters: It was me.

Lord Sandhurst: Do you mean that the Probation Service does not want to tell you things or that your people are anxious about passing things on to the Probation Service, or both, and what sort of things do you mean?

Carrie Peters: This is crucial. We share everything with the Probation Service pertaining to risk. It is more the other way round; there are things that have to be taken out of the risk information, like the names of victims and particular information about them, but it can go too far and too much is taken out.

Lord Sandhurst: Where does that lead to problems in practice?

Carrie Peters: When we pick up referrals, it is important that we understand the restrictions. If we are supporting people into accommodation, certain types of accommodation might not be suitable.

Lord Sandhurst: Is that because of the risk they pose to other people?

Carrie Peters: Yes. Again, with employment it is very important. We need to understand all the risk information, but sometimes we are operating a little in the dark.

Lord Sandhurst: Are there any formal guidelines drawn up by the Probation Service, for example, saying, "We can't tell you about certain things", and would it help if there were? Does it vary from area to area?

Carrie Peters: It does vary from area to area, although it has improved. There are guidelines, and what is put on to Refer and Monitor has certainly improved in the last two years, but there are still gaps.

Lord Sandhurst: Would it help if the Chief Probation Officer issued guidance?

Carrie Peters: Yes. Clearer guidance about what needs to be provided would help, but access to systems where we can see the risk assessment and the change in risk would be even better.

Niki Scordi: We definitely find that risk assessments are not always available. They are useful, particularly for the higher levels of offending. However, women are slightly different, because the majority of women commit low-level offences and should not necessarily have a high level of risk associated with them.

Lord Sandhurst: The risk assessment would have been in the pre-sentence report to the court, would it not?

Carrie Peters: These days, there are often no pre-sentence reports.

Lord Sandhurst: That is the problem, is it not? I sat in the Crown Court, and in my experience we never did one without one.

Carrie Peters: Absolutely. Pre-sentence reports were thought of as sentencing documents, which they were, but they were also something that we would refer back to that had a lot of information that is not often there now.

Q94 **Baroness Chakrabarti:** Listening to you all talking about your work and the range of services that you are providing to these people, we know that there are a certain number of people with very loud voices in our country, in parts of the media, in parts of the political community, who are very sceptical about probation and would like to build many more prisons and lock more people up. I think that some of them would listen to you talking about mental health and domestic violence services, peer-to-peer support, getting people into housing and employment and think that that is rather too tree-hugging or people-hugging and not punitive enough. To me, it sounds a bit like the old “advise, assist and befriend” duties that probation officers used to have before those duties were abolished.

What would you say, in defence of what you are offering, to a critic and a sceptic of the whole concept of this work in the community? I will not name the newspapers I am thinking of, but you can imagine which they are.

Rebecca Robson: I would say look at the evidence, look at the reoffending rates for people who access our services. I would say, without seeing the numbers, that they are significantly better than the numbers of people who go to prison. When we look at the people who are in prison and the vulnerabilities they have experienced throughout their life, we have to question who is in there and how they got there in the first place. We cannot just say that we need to hit everybody with a big stick. We have been doing that for centuries, and it is not working. The numbers are just going up and up.

People who access our services are less likely to reoffend. Surely, if our job is to help to make the community safer and to rehabilitate people to join and be active contributing citizens, this is what we should be doing, and we should be doing more of it. It is not a soft option; it is really difficult. Certainly in our services we really challenge people to change their behaviour, which is not easy when we look at their life experiences. They have not had it easy, and we, as members of the community, have made their lives really difficult. They have experienced abuse, which is not their fault. They have experienced poor mental health as a result of abuse, childhood trauma, sexual abuse. We have an obligation to help put that right as well as to help them make better decisions in the future.

Niki Scordi: I would add that women get sent to prison much more quickly than men. Women are held to higher standards. Women have much higher levels of mental ill health and self-harm, and they are a much lower risk. They represent only

4% of our prison community, and yet we are imprisoning them at higher rates instead of giving them the support they need.

I would echo what Rebecca said about the level of domestic abuse. At least six out of 10—we believe it is more than that—are domestic abuse survivors in prison. They have experienced a high level of trauma in childhood. Some of our research on the women we support says that over 70% have been abused before the age of 12. A high level of women in prison are care leavers who come from poverty and homelessness. These are women who have experienced some of the highest levels of disadvantage. The community has left them behind. Leaving them in prison or ignoring them is not going to make the problem—if that is what we think they are—go away. They need help, and that is the best we can do.

Carrie Peters: I agree with everything that has been said, but I would also ask people to remember that we are being commissioned to deliver rehabilitative services. The range of services that are being delivered are in addition to the services that are being delivered by the Probation Service. There are elements of punishment—for example, community payback, fines and all sorts of other restrictions—that are placed on people, whereas our part is to deliver the rehabilitation.

I absolutely agree with everything that has been said about women in the criminal justice system, but men in the criminal justice system also have really high levels of unresolved trauma and high levels of care experience. There are people who have been through our care systems and come out getting into trouble, which might not have happened if they had had the support of a family. There are people who have neurodiversity and disability. There are a number of people who have a lot of challenges in the criminal justice system, and we have to help to support them with all those things in order to reduce reoffending. At the end of the day, if we reduce reoffending, we also protect the public.

The Chair: Can I just go back to information sharing for a moment? Carrie, you mentioned GDPR. Were you saying that there is a misplaced concern about infringing the data rules and that people are being overly cautious?

Carrie Peters: Yes, when it is in relation to the victim rather than the person we are working with. Quite a lot of information about the victim will be taken out, but sometimes we need to know if there are children at risk or an ex-partner or something like that. I do not want to overplay that element, but certainly for some practitioners how much they can share is a factor. Some of it probably comes down to trusting us as partners to hold sensitive information, to deal with it and to treat it with the respect it needs, and to let it inform the work we need to do.

Q95 Lord Blunkett: My apologies for not being with you in person. I am a Luddite when it comes to technology, so I would like to congratulate the technical staff, because the quality of my line is much better than I have had for a very long time. Thank you so much to the three of you. This has been enlightening. I have picked up issues about communication, capacity and flexibility, and you have partly answered the

question I was going to raise about pressures on rehabilitation and specific needs.

You have talked about housing, mental health, and domestic violence issues. You all appear to be working on education, training, and employment. I appreciate that you have talked about how you do things, and not just what you do, but I wonder if you could say a bit more about the pressures that you think are unmet and whether there is sufficient support for literacy and numeracy recovery. There is a numeracy programme called Multiply. Can you access that?

Niki Scordi: We do a lot of work on employability, particularly education and training. For most of the women it tends to be further down the line, particularly because of the high levels of mental health, trauma and accommodation needs that must be prioritised before somebody feels safe enough to address employability. Our peer mentor programme, for example, provides a way into volunteering once a woman feels more stable. It has been a great success. About 70% of those who have trained with us end up in training and education or in employment. Some of them work with us or for our partners.

However, we do not tend to focus on literacy and numeracy needs, mainly because of the short period we have to work with women and the range of needs we have to address. By the time we prioritise the ones that are at the highest level, numeracy and literacy tend to be at the very bottom, but we do see a high level of those needs. We provide a lot of advocacy support and help with IT, because digital exclusion is a big issue.

Lord Blunkett: Could you point the women to other services like literacy and numeracy classes?

Niki Scordi: Yes, we can, as part of our education and training support, but, again, we aim for the woman to lead on her priority needs, which are often about physical and emotional safety before education and training. The length of support we provide is often shortened because of the design of services, and that makes it quite hard for us to address long-term future needs.

Rebecca Robson: Our experiences are similar to Niki's in that we do not particularly focus on numeracy and literacy needs, again because they are not highlighted by the women. We have peer mentors who support the women with literacy during the groups, for example, as well as specialist programmes, separate from the contracted work, that help to move people closer to the job market, and we have had some successes with those.

There are two distinct groups of women who come to us via the contract. One is women who have previously worked and are struggling to re-engage with work or education because of their offence. We have a good success rate in helping to build their confidence and think about whether they can go back to similar types of work or whether they need to look for something different. The issue of women who have perhaps not worked before or have not sustained employment for long periods of time, again, as Niki says, tends to be lower down the list. We focus on

helping them to cope with life a little better and to move on to more specialist programmes that can offer longer-term support.

Lord Blunkett: Thank you. Carrie, this is a bit left-field, but have you any evidence that women might be more literate than men?

Carrie Peters: I am not aware of any evidence of that.

Lord Blunkett: Okay, that is fine. It was left-field. I will leave you to answer the proper question.

Carrie Peters: In terms of neurodiversity, we work with an organisation and use a tool that does not diagnose people but identifies their strengths and barriers, such as dyslexia or dyscalculia. It then provides tips on how we can support people to better engage with our services. It is a huge issue.

In terms of literacy and numeracy more generally, many years ago—I do not know if you remember—there was a programme called OLASS in the community (the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service). Funding went to probation services and colleges delivered literacy, numeracy and ESOL classes in probation settings in the same way as the education provision is delivered in prison. I was a big supporter of that back in the day and think it really worked. A lot of the people we work with have had a really bad experience at school and in institutions, and it is quite difficult to get them into college. Local colleges also carry out risk assessments and often do not want people who have committed certain types of offences, or sometimes any offences, to attend, so bringing their services on to probation premises works well.

We try to link with organisations like Toe by Toe (Shannon Trust) that help with reading, and Communicators and adult education facilities that can work alongside us in our hubs. We find that that can be really successful.

Lord Blunkett: I ought to declare an interest. I am honorary president of the Sheffield Association for the Voluntary Teaching of English, so I am very familiar with the problem of people not being welcomed or not wanting to go to institutions. It is a really important point.

The Chair: Rebecca, as you were talking about literacy and numeracy needs, I wondered about the age profile of your clients. Can you give us an idea of how they are made up?

Rebecca Robson: I could not tell you off the top of my head. As I get a bit older, they all look young. I think we have a range. The oldest people coming to us via the contract are in their sixties and seventies, but most of them are in their twenties and thirties. We have quite low numbers in Cumbria compared to elsewhere.

Baroness Meacher: Can you say a bit more about what the most pressing needs are and whether they differ between women and men? Niki has mentioned mental health problems, and you have mentioned housing problems, but can you say a bit more about what sort of mental health problems these people tend to suffer with

and whether you can deal with them? If not, where do you refer people? How severe are their problems, where do they go, and what sort of treatment do they get?

Rebecca Robson: A lot of the mental health difficulties we see are the result of experiences of domestic and sexual abuse in childhood, and then ongoing domestic abuse. Frequently that is mixed in with addiction, which is often a coping technique for experiences of abuse. There is a lot of suicidal ideation, self-harm, anxiety, and fear of crowds. Increasingly, since Covid, there are fears about not being able to leave the house. As Niki talked about earlier, building relationships can take an awfully long time because people struggle to leave home.

Baroness Meacher: Would Niki and Carrie agree that depression, anxiety and addiction are the main mental health problems?

Niki Scordi: Yes, but we would not see addiction as necessarily being a mental health problem. It is more of a coping mechanism. Trauma, and trying to cope with trauma, is what we see, and very high levels of self-harm and suicidal ideation, particularly since Covid-19. In the first year of Covid-19, there were 700% more suicides and overdoses among women on probation. It has eased a little but not hugely, and it has continued right through to today, exacerbated by high poverty levels. People are worried about keeping their homes, keeping food on the table, and purchasing basics.

I would say that women in particular worry about their children, whether they are with them or not. Eighty per cent of the women we work with have children, but only about 25% have care of them. Often, they are separated because of prison and cannot have them back, and that is a real concern for them. It is a motivating factor for change, but it is also a barrier if it seems they will not be able to rebuild that relationship and have the children returned.

I would say that levels of trauma from domestic abuse lead to very low self-esteem and an inability to trust anyone. Having to survive in a system that seems daunting to us, let alone to someone who has gone through that, sometimes makes it very difficult for people to carry on. A lot of what we provide is continual one-to-one emotional support with a trusted person. We provide counselling support where possible, but that is funded by a different service and we always have waiting lists for that, as you can imagine. It is really difficult to support women to the level they need, particularly as the service is short term. They begin to move forwards and then we have to stop engaging with them. That is not the best way to support women.

Baroness Meacher: You have talked a lot about the causes of mental health problems. Many men suffer with depression, anxiety and addiction. Addiction may be somewhat separate, but nevertheless it requires treatment. Would you say that the presenting problems are different in women than in men, or just the causes of them?

Niki Scordi: They are at much higher levels in women. Evidence, and our own experience, shows that women have double the rates of self-harm, depression and suicide. A woman once told me, “Prison is like a mental health institution, and I wouldn’t want to go there because it makes me feel worse”. It is a holding space for people with trauma, and that is just a terrible indictment of the experience.

Baroness Meacher: Do you agree, Carrie?

Carrie Peters: Yes. Certainly the levels of mental illness are much higher among women in the criminal justice system than among men in the criminal justice system. However, the level of past abuse and trauma and the impact on mental health is very high among men in the criminal justice system compared with men in the general population. With men, we know that there are also issues with identity and toxic masculinity. Men often feel that they have to be seen to cope, to be tough, and not to talk about mental health, and that can manifest in all sorts of different ways. Of course, rates of self-harm and suicide are very high, but it can also manifest in behaviour that is abusive to others, such as domestic abuse and sexual harm. So, yes, some of the causes are absolutely the same. But while some of the impacts are the same, some are different.

Baroness Meacher: Niki mentioned referring people on to services. Are there professional mental health services—CBT and other forms of mental health treatment—available across the country if people need them, or are you just left with providing some friendly support and that is all they will get?

Niki Scordi: The answer is that mental health services are not sufficient anywhere. We work in six Probation regions—that is 80 counties plus most of London—and everywhere we have waiting lists and insufficient services. Also, there is often what is referred to, terribly, as a dual diagnosis. Mental health professionals will use the fact that you have a drug or alcohol addiction as a barrier to prevent you from accessing services and support, but you are abusing substances because you are trying to cope, so your mental health needs to be supported. We often find that women in particular—I am sure Carrie will say men, too—fall between the cracks and both services will deny support.

Baroness Meacher: Would you say that making sure these services are available, particularly for addiction, would be a major contribution to dealing with reoffending?

Niki Scordi: We would say that services being available for mental health, rather than addiction, is particularly important.

Rebecca Robson: Yes, and for domestic abuse.

Carrie Peters: The services need to be available at the point where the person is ready to receive them. Often people say that someone has to want to change, to be ready to change—we call it a “reachable moment”—but the opportunity also has to

be there at that point. Often, there are long waiting lists for counselling or other forms of therapy, so the opportunity can be missed.

Q96 **Baroness Meacher:** What about young adults? Would you say they have different needs than older people, or is there any other sense in which they are different?

Rebecca Robson: The young people we work with struggle much more with relationships, not just intimate relationships but all relationships. That may be because much of their life is spent online as opposed to in person, so they have not quite learned in the same way as perhaps we did when we were young. That is a really big issue. Accommodation also tends to be more difficult for young people, particularly if they are single and do not have family, and social isolation. In our experience, young people have fewer coping techniques than women who are a bit older.

Baroness Meacher: Niki, would you agree?

Niki Scordi: Yes. We have specialist key workers who work with the under-25s. They will tell us that there are high numbers of women who have been in care, under community orders and in the prison system, which means that they need practical support. How do you set up a household? How do you set up a bank account or deal with bills? They do not have a network around them or any previous experience, so that is often the first thing they will ask for. They require much more flexible support, and a trusting relationship is really important.

As Rebecca was saying, it is important to have a safe space to talk about what relationships are, how to build relationships, who to trust, what a healthy relationship is. There are much higher levels of domestic abuse among the under-25s, and the national crime statistics will support that. We do not give enough recognition to the fact that they might have had their own coercive and controlling relationships as much as home experiences. Knowing what a healthy relationship is, what information is available, how to keep yourself safe, is quite a high need for younger women.

Carrie Peters: We know that, because of brain development and maturity, we need to approach young adults in a different way, not assuming that one size fits all but looking at each individual. Some of that will be about how they engage with us. We might need to work harder to engage people who are resistant and to think about different ways to get people on board, perhaps using the arts, or sports, or whatever it takes. Sitting one to one in a room with someone is not that attractive to a lot of young people. How you work with them is really important. It needs to be done in a trauma-informed way, recognising how many have been through the care system. Building a relationship with a trusted adult is vital, so that they can model what a good relationship can look like and learn new ways of interacting.

Baroness Meacher: A lot of young people turn to drink or drugs to deal with their problems, but you do not seem to think that intervening at an early stage and dealing with the addiction would be a helpful way to avoid them finishing up in

prison. We know that very large numbers of people in prison are there for drug-related offences and so on. It is a major problem in the criminal justice system, but I do not get the feeling that any of you see that that ought to be confronted early on, looking at why they are turning to drugs and alcohol, and treating that problem.

Niki Scordi: It ought to be done, but it is not part of this particular service. We see additional services in London, for example—I am sure Rebecca will say the same in her area—where services like this are being co-commissioned with local PCCs or violence reduction units.

Since 2018, Advance has been working with 15 year-olds upwards in order to intervene at that earlier stage, particularly where there is a youth to adult transition, working with youth offending and social care teams before the person gets to adult services. However, it is not funded. Actually, it is not funded in most areas up and down the country, as far as I know. We talk a lot about young women and particularly men entering gang life, but our experience is that they are not entering gang life but building relationships. Some of those friends may be gang members and then it becomes a matter of survival. There is a young woman who tells the story of being 15 years old and being gang-raped by four men, going to the police, being let down, finding herself in a gang with a child and being arrested at the age of 17. She was 21, I believe, before she was referred to us for support.

Q97 Lord Sandhurst: I want to ask the three of you about low-level prolific offenders and what specific needs they may have. We know, for example, that the Probation Service has identified what it calls eight criminogenic needs, including accommodation, education, drugs and alcohol, and that those are, in turn, embedded in the offender assessment system. How linked up is that, and what specific needs do you think there are? Let us start with Rebecca for a change.

Rebecca Robson: In our experience, many of them struggle with poverty and experiences of poverty. It is not just about them; it is about their wider family as well. They do not have a safety net. Where we might go to a friend or a relative who would help us out—I would go to my Nana—often they do not have those family support networks. Unresolved trauma is also a really big issue. They are trying to find other ways of coping or managing with life, and making what we might class as bad decisions but really just struggling to find some answers.

Lord Sandhurst: You are talking in the context of Cumbria. Are these mainly rural areas? I suppose Carlisle and Barrow are the largest.

Rebecca Robson: Yes, Carlisle and Barrow are the two main areas.

Lord Sandhurst: They are the two big centres, and then there is Penrith.

Rebecca Robson: Penrith is very small. If you visit, it seems lovely and picturesque, but poverty looks slightly different in those areas. You might feel more isolated.

Lord Sandhurst: This is about rural poverty and isolation.

Rebecca Robson: On the west coast we have Workington and Whitehaven. There is an awful lot of poverty over there, a lot in Carlisle and a lot in Barrow. Unfortunately, they feature quite highly in the national statistics, they are at the top of the super-output areas, and in the rural areas. Mental health problems are very common in what we call prolific offenders, together with poor experiences of the education system and the care system. We also see an awful lot of neurodiversity in this group of people. I am not saying that there is more of it now, but I am looking for it more, so I see it more.

Niki Scordi: I would say the same. We do not find a difference in the needs of a so-called prolific offender versus any other. We have diversion services at the first point of arrest with the police, and we find that the level of need among women, whether it is at that very first point of arrest or whether they have been through the system several times, is the same. Need and offending are not necessarily linked, but obviously the greater the level of complex needs and disadvantages you have, the more you have to survive on your own. If the system is not catching you, you do the best you can. The disappointment is when we see women who have been through probation several times but have not been referred to us until much later. That is a challenge, and it is about capacity. We could do more at an earlier stage, and that might have a better impact than denying the service to women.

Lord Sandhurst: Why have they not been referred to you earlier?

Niki Scordi: It is about the ability of probation practitioners to go through the caseloads and our own capacity. If we are already working at 170%, we just haven't got it. Also, we are not working sufficiently long enough with them, because so much help is now designed around rehabilitation days and activities. We just do not get to the stage where they can cope without sufficient support from us. That means that we are putting sticking plasters on the core issues instead of really addressing them.

Carrie Peters: Working with prolific male offenders, we find some of the same mental health issues, but substance misuse is also very common. There is a big link between shoplifting and homelessness, as well as lack of family, lack of support and, of course, debt and poverty. Many of the people we work with who are prolific offenders, like a lot of men in the criminal justice system, have multiple and complex needs.

As I said earlier, because of the way services have been commissioned for men, they have to go to lots of different services. We need to look at the whole person, because all those needs are interrelated. People often talk about being passed from pillar to post and not feeling like someone is looking at the whole situation.

Q98 Lord Sandhurst: Among the services you offer, which best addresses the needs of people serving community orders, and are there obstacles to effective delivery? Sentences have a menu of 16 requirements, and among those are rehabilitation activity requirements, which I think Niki said take up a lot of time. On the other hand, there are also drug and alcohol-related requirements, such as testing and

rehabilitation, if I can pick on those in contrast. There is also the mental health treatment requirement.

You have been telling us that underlying a lot of this, not always but often, is a mental health, drug or alcohol issue, or a combination of two or three of those. Would you like to see a focus on those three? As I understand it, those requirements are hardly ever imposed in the community orders. Only around 5.5% of offenders get a drug, alcohol or mental health-related order, yet it seems that if these problems are not sorted, you will not be able to move on to rehabilitation.

Carrie Peters: I think it depends. I worked in drug and alcohol treatment for many years, and there needs to be a treatment need to receive those sentences. Back in the old days of Drug Treatment and Testing Orders (DTTOs), when there were review courts, you had a close relationship with the sentencer. I was a big fan of review courts. Many of the people we are talking about here though do not need that level of treatment, but the substance misuse and mental health issues still need addressing..

Lord Sandhurst: They do not obviously need the same level of treatment as someone who is in a bad way, but if they stopped misusing alcohol, would that not help?

Carrie Peters: It certainly would, but sometimes, like we have said, they are using alcohol and drugs to deal with all the other things.

Lord Sandhurst: They are self-medicating.

Carrie Peters: It is a combination of things, and in the well-being services that we offer we are helping people to look at some of that. We also deliver dependency and recovery services, which are part of the commissioned rehabilitative services. We take people along to their treatment appointments and help them to engage.

Lord Sandhurst: Niki, what do you have to say?

Niki Scordi: I would say the same as Carrie: that, actually, what works best for that woman and for our service is that we work with her to identify where her needs are. She may know that she is using alcohol to cope, but telling her to stop and taking her to a treatment will not take away the reason why she is self-medicating. You have to address the underlying issues. If somebody cannot address those, at the first challenging circumstance they will reach for the methods they have access to.

As I have said before, it is not about rehabilitation days; it is about us working with that woman, seeing what works best and working with her to identify and engage with her, build a trusting relationship, and then let her feel agency over what changes she can make at her pace. That is what trauma-informed and women-centric or person-centric services look like. We can try telling somebody what to do for their own good, but if they are not ready, they can attend the courses but they will not benefit from them. You asked what works best. It is when we focus on that

person and support them to get to the stage where they are ready to engage. The barrier is telling them to do it for their own good when they are not ready.

Lord Sandhurst: Where does the so-called rehabilitation activity requirement fit into all this? They seem to be imposed in 42% of cases. What is that doing for people?

Niki Scordi: In previous iterations of this service, we could work with that woman directly and the probation practitioner could count the work that we were doing as rehabilitation days, but the woman had a bit of choice in that. The way this particular model has been designed, the probation practitioner sets what those rehabilitation days are and we then have to go back and amend the system. If we have a good relationship with that practitioner, if we have worked closely with them, as in the cases Rebecca described, they will come on that journey with us and the woman. So there are three of us—the woman, the probation practitioner, and us—working towards the same goal. Otherwise, you will find yourself being told by a system that the woman has to have X, Y, Z appointments, she does not engage very positively, and we do not see the benefits.

We need outcomes-based work with a number of days of support. Women will continue to engage if they see the benefit, and they will often want to engage for longer than the service is funded for. We do not have a problem maintaining relationships, building that engagement and seeing positive change if we have that positive approach right from the beginning. If it is punitive or seen as enforced rehabilitation, there will be resistance to that, as there would be with everyone.

Baroness Chakrabarti: Please correct me if I am wrong, but my understanding is that the probation officer is now an overworked administrator who has authority but is not actually doing the traditional job of a probation officer, which is to form that relationship with the offender. That work is being done by you, but you do not necessarily have the authority, or in some cases the information, that you need.

Carrie Peters: The probation officer's role is much more extensive than an administrator's. They focus on the offence work, and they have the lead on public protection, risk assessment and risk management, so they do a lot more than just refer to our services. We provide the specialist services. Having worked in probation for many years I know that you cannot provide all services as the probation officer. You need specialist services that I do not think were there in the past. You need people who can support with the education, training, employment, accommodation and well-being, and women's services to help that woman to rehabilitate.

You are absolutely right about the number of RAR days. It can be quite restrictive, and we need to work with people for longer.

Lord Sandhurst: Thank you. We are getting the flavour.

Q99 **Baroness Chakrabarti:** That leads me very neatly on to the question about contracts.

Lord Blunkett: I would like to ask about contracts as well, if you do not mind.

The Chair: First, I just want to explore one point, briefly. Given the delays in the treatment becoming available, do you run out of time for the client? You are all nodding. That is fine. We will record the nods.

Baroness Chakrabarti: I understand that all your contracts with government are due to expire in early 2024 or 2025. How, ideally, would you like the Government to approach the next commissioning process? In particular, how would that process be different from the one that was adopted in 2021? I am thinking very much in the context of some of your previous answers about capacity, length of professional relationships, sticking plasters, and so on. How would all the experience, learning and testimony that you have given us effect an improved commissioning process?

Rebecca Robson: As a small charity without separate IT teams, HR teams and contract management teams, it was a very lengthy and complicated process for us. We were supported by Ministry of Justice staff and Probation staff, who have been lovely, understanding and patient, but the process is very complicated. There is a lot of legal language and very technical language. We are a number of years into the contract, but I still do not understand what it means and I do not think I ever will. I have shown it to lots of people. We had to engage solicitors, which is not something we have had to do previously. We are in a town where they build nuclear submarines. I am not sure what their contract process was, but I cannot imagine that it is any more complicated. Overridingly, that is what we found most difficult about the previous process. There is a dynamic framework simplification process, and the title of the meeting is about that long.

Niki Scordi: I would say much more simplified commissioning processes and contracts. They were designed in such a way that they exclude any organisation that is not large. Even with an organisation like Advance, which is considered to be one of the largest women's services, we struggled and had to step in and partner with local organisations that were just not able to manage the service, just to provide support, so it was a barrier to entry.

Regarding the fixing volumes and capacity, the services were designed according to the number of needs and starts rather than the number of referrals and engagement, yet our measures, our service level agreements, are about how quickly we respond to somebody within 10 days. There are no limits to how many people we are supposed to be responding to, so there is a disproportionate impact at the beginning and at the level of administration, which you referred to.

As I said earlier, building services that are based on outcomes rather than the number of needs, sessions and RAR days would be a much more positive way forward. I recognise, however, that this design of the service was so much stronger and better than the one five years before. There were massive improvements, particularly for women. The fact that there is a holistic service, the regions are smaller so that local services can engage, and the contracts are for five years allows for a lot of beneficial work to be done. It takes a long time to mobilise a service and

build local connections and networks. We are just talking about the level of need; we need everyone in the community.

Baroness Chakrabarti: What would you say to commissioning services for an even longer period than that?

Niki Scordi: Absolutely.

Baroness Chakrabarti: What do you think would be appropriate?

Niki Scordi: Ten years.

Rebecca Robson: I was going to say 25. I do not want to go through that process too many times.

Lord Sandhurst: With break clauses, as either side might say, "This isn't working".

Baroness Chakrabarti: You would certainly support something longer than five years.

Niki Scordi: Absolutely. We have been delivering the same service in London, for example, since 2011, and we have probably been commissioned six to seven times in that period.

Carrie Peters: Longer contracts certainly help to build relationships and stability, and people understand where they need to go, but flexibility needs to be built in and you need to be able to adapt to a changing environment as you go; it cannot be too restrictive. Men's and women's services have been commissioned quite differently this time around, but men also have multiple and complex needs. I know I have used that phrase a lot, but it is absolutely right.

Baroness Chakrabarti: What is the difference in the commissioning?

Carrie Peters: Women's services have been commissioned in a holistic way. There are other specialists as part of the supply chain, but there is one provider, and there is just one relationship with the commissioner and the contract manager, whereas men's services have been commissioned according to all the separate needs.

For someone who finds it difficult to engage, we are setting up all sorts of hurdles for them, because they have to go to all these different places, and nothing facilitates all those different providers talking to each other and working together. We are all on Refer and Monitor, but we cannot see anything anybody else has put on there. We need men's services to be commissioned in a holistic way by region in the same way that women's services are, but also to have a diverse supply chain to support that.

The Chair: How has that happened? Is it just because the numbers are so different that people have fallen into a habit of not seeing men as a whole person, whereas with women the numbers are smaller and therefore it is easier to go that route?

Carrie Peters: I think so. It is absolutely right to commission women's services in a holistic way, and we are totally supportive of that, but that would work for men as well so that there is one relationship. At the moment, every contract is managed separately, and there is a lot of waste in the system for all those individual contracts. You could state how many different providers need to be part of that delivery if you wanted to set that out in the commissioning process, but, for me, what is needed is designing a holistic service around the person.

Baroness Chakrabarti: Is that because you are a large company and you would be able to offer that? A lot of other people would not.

Carrie Peters: There are lots of large companies, voluntary sector as well as private sector, that could do that. We work with lots of smaller voluntary sector providers that are quite happy for us to deal with that relationship with the authority. We at Ingeus are a real champion of VCS; we know that it brings so much to the party. But we do not need to have lots of separate little contracts, because it does not work around the person. That is our experience.

Niki Scordi: Women's services, just like men's services, were intended to be designed—in fact, the first iteration was designed—according to need, because the idea was that a probation practitioner would assess the need and then identify what sessions an individual—a woman—would go to.

The women's sector has never worked that way. We had a lot of sessions at the design stage with the Ministry of Justice and the HMPPS where we said that that will not work for women. It is a positive that the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS listened and, within a year, redesigned women's services. As a result, though, those services are underfunded, because obviously if you are funding one service for all needs, you are likely to underrecord that as opposed to funding separate needs. We do not have sufficient funding for accommodation or mental health, but we can work with a woman across all her needs in one holistic way, which is what Carrie is referring to. That, as I said, was because of our working very closely with HMPPS at design service and encouraging them to take lessons from the evidence.

The Chair: You have not yet managed to persuade the MoJ that its outcomes should be recorded rather than input. Does that apply to you all?

Niki Scordi: This is where having five-year contracts becomes difficult, because we need flexibility in those. There is often the response that the contract is the contract and therefore we have to wait five years before we can adjust that. We keep providing information and evidence and they are looking at it, they are aware of it, and they are engaging. I hope we will see a benefit to that.

The Chair: For our purposes, I would like to record that the other two witnesses were nodding to that.

Q100 **Lord Blunkett:** I was very entertained by Rebecca's comparison with the nuclear submarine contract in Barrow-in-Furness. Rebecca, I just want to pick up the point

you made about the way in which you were supported in putting a very complicated contract bid together, and, Carrie, you mentioned that you supported organisations working with you on a holistic approach.

Is it not a real challenge for niche groups that are embedded in community to obtain contracts and to go through the commissioning process, rather than national organisations coming in and looking for partners down the line? Could the three of you say a word or two about that and whether there is any improvement that we could make? Secondly, there was mention earlier of the shortness of the contract time with the client, and I wonder if we could explore that a little.

Rebecca Robson: The Growth Company is a big charitable organisation, and if it was not for them we probably would not have secured the contract, because it made available and very kindly shared lots of its policies and procedures, things we had never heard about before—business continuity, disaster recovery plans and exit plans, et cetera—and which, until you enter the contract world, you do not even know exist.

Each one of them has around 100 policies—patch policies, et cetera—and the Growth Company shared all its policies with us. We will be eternally grateful to it for that. If things like that were available to smaller organisations, they might feel that it is more possible to bid for contracts, because that is a whole new world; you just do not have the skill, the expertise or the time to explore it and pay somebody to develop them for you.

The Chair: You must have had experience as a charity of producing policies, the risk register and so on, but you are saying that it is much more complex and a much larger exercise than a small or medium-sized charity would have to go through anyway.

Rebecca Robson: Yes. We do not have a separate contract team, so I did all that and I bought in a small amount of freelance time. It is a big risk to take and lots of areas are not needed when we receive grants from local authorities. The amount of IT security need is totally correct and justifiable, and I am glad it exists, but, when it is a new thing, setting all that up is very time-consuming, and without additional specialist support it is impossible.

The Chair: I wonder whether after today you might just give us two or three examples of what you think is over the top for your sort of organisation. It would be helpful to us if you can be in touch with the team.

Niki Scordi: It was prohibitive for all women's services, including for Advance, which is one of the largest. We are not that large as a sector, so we are talking a few million, if you are lucky, for the entirety of your income, so you are not going to have specialist services, although Advance was perhaps in a better place than some of the others.

We were able to do exactly what Rebecca was saying and share some of our work and support some of the smaller organisations, but just to pass the information

security you needed between £10,000 and £25,000. The contracts were only £100,000 to £300,000 each, so the expectations were very disproportionate for such a small value. The bidding process required you to complete a lot of pages—I think 170 pages at one point—and the same with the contracts.

If you compare that with other grants that central government gives local organisations like us for millions of pounds, it is just so disproportionate. We are a domestic abuse charity; I know you have domestic abuse services. We work with high-risk life and death situations, safeguarding and sensitive data all the time, and yet we struggle to engage with this service, so that is a major challenge and barrier to accessing for local services.

To Lord Blunkett's question, we do engage with local services. In our case, where there was an existing women's service we supported it to deliver the service but took away the responsibility of filling in forms and so on, even sharing our system so that it did not have to go through the security. The difficulty is that women's services have been so underfunded up and down the country for over a decade that there were no local services with a specialism in many areas and we had to start building capacity and sharing that expertise.

If nothing else, one of the biggest benefits of this commissioning exercise has been that women's services have come together and made sure that there are support and specialist services in every local area, and that expertise from some of us is shared across the landscape so that we can build those services and capacity at the local level. That is a positive from the service.

Lord Blunkett: Carrie, is that the same with Ingeus?

Carrie Peters: Yes. Some of the contracts we deliver are very small-value, and we have to do an awful lot to meet the obligations of the contract.

Lord Blunkett: Chair, I just want to say there have been three excellent witnesses. Thank you.

Q101 Lord Sandhurst: When I fill in my tax return—personally, it is not very complicated—there are all sorts of windows that can open up. You fill them in if they apply to you and, if not, you say, “No, not for me”. Could these contracts not be designed like that? You could fill them in and say, “Page five, no, no, no, not relevant”, and you might have a box in which you explain shortly why it does not apply to what you are going to offer. If the Ministry of Justice wants to come back because it thinks it might be relevant, it could ask you to fill it in, but you would not have to fill in all 150 pages completely in the first place. Do you understand the concept? Is that realistic, or would it not work?

Carrie Peters: It is less about what you have to fill in and more about having to read it and understand it. Obviously, if you are a smaller organisation, you need to get someone legal to come in to really make you aware of what the obligations and risks are.

Lord Sandhurst: The contracts are aimed at everyone who is providing any service, even though, let us say, 20 different types of service are being provided.

Carrie Peters: They become very restrictive. It is very much that the contract is the contract, like we said. It can stifle innovation and stop you from going the extra mile. You are not allowed to go the extra mile; you have to do what is set out in the contract. It would be good if there was much more flexibility built into them.

Lord Sandhurst: Is there a group of charities, like an overarching body, that could talk this through with the ministry in practical terms?

Niki Scordi: For women's services, we have come together and built the National Women's Justice Coalition as part of this.

Lord Sandhurst: Do you talk to the ministry as a group and say, "Look, we don't need all this stuff"?

Niki Scordi: We do. On a positive note, the central contracts team of HMPPS or the Ministry of Justice still meets with us and engages on a regular basis, so we are feeding in regularly—at least every two months, if not more often; I think there is a meeting next week—where it can listen and engage with us.

It is more the processes of change in the Ministry of Justice itself and requiring them to adapt services specifically to smaller organisations that have smaller numbers but a need that is different from that of larger organisations and so on. It is about flexibility in the way they work.

As Carrie says, it is not about one particular form. It is that there were two different stages and two different qualifications even just to start the bidding. Many organisations could not even get past that stage of qualifying and had to adjust the number of policies and needed at the bidding level that could be done later. The specification was overdesigned. If you are designing for outcomes, it gives us the freedom to bring the specialism and expertise we have rather than be prescriptive in what we need to offer, how we offer it and for how long.

Lord Sandhurst: Would you like to see a phased bidding process with stages, whereby if you get through to the second stage or third stage you might have to give more specific, complex information?

Niki Scordi: It could be done like that, or the documentation that we were asked to fill in could be simplified and done once, and information that, once you are granted it, could be part of the due diligence afterwards rather than part of the exercise to begin with.

Q102 **Baroness Prashar:** It is more than the technicality of the forms. It is really about accountability and the outcomes that you are looking at. What they are concerned about is accountability with regard to the money they are giving. It is a different approach. It is not the technicality of how the form is done. Are you having a discussion at that macro-level of what you are trying to do, what the outcomes are

and how you can account for the fact that the money is properly spent—the stewardship of the money—which of course the department has to account for as well?

Niki Scordi: We are beginning to. There are engagement sessions as we speak to talk about what iteration 2 or the next range of commissioning will be, and obviously we hope that a lot of what has been shared here will be taken on board. I know that as a group of organisations and individually we are sharing that at local and at central and regional level.

There are obviously other challenges, such as recognising that we need to shift away from contracts and make them much more grant-based. That would allow for flexibility and payment by results. Even if it is 5%, that is not really the right way to go; 5% of the total contract value is linked to two service level agreements that do not capture the level and quality of work that we do.

Often, in our contract meetings, we will be told how great a service we are providing is—I am sure that is true of everyone—how much we are working with them, how adaptable we are, how collaborative we are, but that is not reflected in our contracts, in the way our results are measured, or necessarily in the way our outcomes are captured, which is about substance of the quality of the service and the impact that we have rather than the process and the speed of it.

The Chair: Is it more difficult to measure quality than numbers? Do you think that is why contracts go down this route? This is not an unfamiliar story and is not confined to this sector. As part of your contract, are you required to work with any other organisations, or is that left to you? I am asking, because I have come across it in another setting recently.

Niki Scordi: We are not required to work with anybody specific, but we already provide most of our services in collaboration. We have 10 partners in our London service and five partners in all our other regional services.

Carrie Peters: It is not in our contract either, but we work with a wide range of partners.

Q103 **The Chair:** I am rather reluctant to ask what is the single most important thing that you would like to see in commissioning, what change you would like to see, because you have given us a pretty comprehensive answer to that and it might not be very sensible to ask what single change you would like to see.

Carrie Peters: From our perspective, we would like to be a genuine partner, and we would like there to be more trust, more access to systems, greater ability to pool our collective resources and to be flexible and adapt as we go, and for the contract to be the agreement as to how we are going to work together; not to restrict, not to stifle, but to allow us to learn together and to get better at changing people's lives. We have shared aims. We all want to achieve the same thing and we all want to make a better society, so it is how we can be trusted partners and do that together.

Niki Scordi: I am afraid I am going to be repetitive. I want a longer and more flexible engagement period. We know that sometimes it takes up to six weeks to engage meaningfully with a woman. We need a longer and more flexible support plan where she has more agency and we and the probation practitioner work towards that. We also need support for the woman beyond the community order, so that there is a lasting impact and outcomes rather than setting her up to fail and therefore wasting resources in the system.

Rebecca Robson: I would like a longer contract, and access to live information about risk that we had before when we had access to the other systems. I absolutely agree that we should be held to account, but there is an awful lot of focus on things that we are measured against, such as the 10 days and the five days, and, for various reasons to do with systems, there has been no clawback of money but it has taken up an awful lot of everybody's time.

The Chair: Yes. So there is a big opportunity cost and a huge burden on a few people.

Rebecca Robson: I would get rid of that. Still measure it, but focus on something else and invest resources for public benefit.

The Chair: Let me check whether members have any further questions.

Lord Blunkett: Not from me. The session was excellent. Thank you very much indeed.

The Chair: Rebecca, I asked you if you could come back to us on one thing, but if any of you think of anything else that you wish we had covered, please let us know. It has been an excellent session. Thank you so much. We are really grateful. Thanks, also, to your colleagues behind you, who I am sure had an input into all this.