The value of flexibility and lived experience to probation

Liam, Lived Experience Member
Revolving Doors

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One of the longest relationships I have had has been with probation, over 17 years on and off, and ever since I was 15 years old. In that time, I’ve had both some good and not as good probation workers. The thing that was consistent about these good workers was how they took a flexible approach to me, something I want to tell you more about in this short article.

I want to start off by recognising how tough a job you, as probation workers, have. Probation workers have always felt overworked and rushed off their feet to me. As much as I get frustrated that when I have my next appointment, two weeks later, details may be forgotten, I recognise that my worker has probably spoken to 200 people in that time. The caseloads are way too high for just one person. The service should be all about quality over quantity, but it often feels like a conveyor belt; next, next, next. It’s not your fault that you are often overworked like that. As I said in my intro, I have had some good and some not so good experiences with probation. I want to first tell you more about two key issues I’ve had in my time on probation, before telling you about two solutions to address these.

### Issue #1 - Not following through on promises

The first issue is not being able to change officer if you don’t get along and no longer feel you can build the trust needed to have a productive, honest relationship. This can make your time on probation ten times harder when it doesn’t need to be. Almost always this has come down to my officer not following through on promises. One officer I had, for example, on several occasions didn’t call me back when they said they would. When they didn’t call me back as promised, it made me paranoid. I thought to myself ‘did I just miss the phone call? Am I now going to get a warning?’ This stresses you out, you worry about the letter coming and being sent back to court, even when you know you aren’t missing appointments on purpose. When this happens more than a few times, you feel like the relationship can’t be repaired, but at the same time you feel you can’t tell anyone as you feel you might get in trouble.

### Issue #2 - Sometimes feeling unsafe in the office

Sometimes you just don’t want to go into town where the office is, because you know everyone is in town. You know that people will be there from out of the prison you were in, people from the other part of town, people you just don’t get along with and who can cause issues for you.
When I knew I couldn’t change the day of my appointment, to avoid bumping into people who could kick off and cause me trouble, I felt I had no choice but to wait to go in. Even then, you sometimes can’t avoid bumping into the wrong people if you have to sit in the waiting room for a long time. When I feel unsafe, on edge, like this though, I can’t talk openly about what’s going on for me. This issue needs to be recognised more and we need to develop a flexible approach by working together.

**Solution #1 - The value of flexibility**

When probation moved back to a national service, that made things a lot better. The biggest difference though, was having a new worker who took a different, more flexible approach. She understood me and that I sometimes was not in the right frame of mind to engage the best I could with her. In response she always gave me the option to change the date of my appointment, so that we could both make the most of the time we had together. She always kept in touch and stayed in contact, and sometimes sent a text the day before an appointment as a reminder. This all supported me not to go into probation angry or vexed, but in the frame of mind to talk openly about how things were going and how I could make progress.

**Solution 2 - The value of people with lived experience**

People with lived experience can help build better, more honest relationships. Sometimes we (people on probation) can communicate how we are feeling better to someone with lived experience, who can then pass this onto our worker. They can help break down that communication barrier as there are some things that are easier to say to someone else with lived experience.