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Listening to Women, Learning for Justice

A Qualitative Evaluation of Greater
Manchester Problem-Solving Courts for
Women

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the Problem-Solving Courts (PSCs) for women in Greater Manchester, focusing on the experiences of those involved in the process. Launched in 2014, the Greater Manchester PSCs for women is the most well established and longest running model for women in England and Wales, originating as an alternative to custody. The research centres women's voices, while also incorporating the views of Probation staff and Magistrates, to better understand the relational approach, as well as the tensions and challenges, and to explore how PSCs can be improved to better support women.

The evaluation adopted a strengths-based approach to conducting the research through an Appreciative Inquiry. The research includes the perspectives of 12 Women, 6 Magistrates and 6 Probation staff to develop an understanding of the PSCs and the role they can play in supporting women who are at risk of entering custody. The evaluation shows that while PSCs can offer encouragement and recognition, the real progress women make often depends on the everyday support they receive from Probation services and Women's Centres. These services support women with a range of issues, such as housing, recovery, and mental health, areas often beyond the reach of the court. By contrast, the court environment itself was often described as intimidating, stigmatising and disconnected from women's lives.

Women said they wanted to be treated with respect, listened to, and supported in a way that recognised their strengths as well as their struggles. They asked for neutral spaces for reviews, better information about the process, and meaningful involvement in decisions about their lives. They also wanted greater equity and representation within the review panels.

Key Findings:

- Court spaces are problematic and not suited to supporting women post-sentence. Community-based or online settings were more effective.
- Women often did not fully understand the process or felt left out of decisions. They wanted clearer information and better preparation, before and after the process.
- Women preferred reviews that provided validation and looked to the future at what they could achieve, not their past.
- Women consistently credited Probation staff and Women's Centres as the people that made the biggest difference in helping them make changes.

- PSC models, processes and stakeholders would see a range of benefits from the meaningful and embedded involvement of lived expertise.

Recommendations:

- Trauma sensitive and comfortable environments for PSC reviews, moving away from court spaces.
- Ownership, participation and visibility, embedding lived expertise across PSCs models.
- Clear and timely communication and information to provide transparency to ensure relevance of the process for women accessing PSCs.
- Accessible and long-term support, involving multi-agency partners and advocating for sustainable solutions.

1. Introduction

This evaluation report provides an in-depth exploration of the Greater Manchester Problem-Solving Courts for women through the voices of the women that participate in them, alongside insights from Probation staff and Magistrates involved in their delivery. By foregrounding women's experiences and professional reflections, the report provides a narrative-led account that reflects upon both the challenges and potential of Problem-Solving Courts (PSCs) as a supportive and gender-responsive approach.

PSCs for women are positioned as an innovative and rehabilitative approach in the criminal legal system, aiming to offer a community alternative to custodial sentences and a more responsive and person-centred alternative to traditional court processes. This evaluation examines this ambition, exploring both the promise and the limitations of the Greater Manchester model for women. The report is structured to reflect women's journey of engagement with PSCs and presents evidence across key areas including women's perceptions of PSCs, their experiences of the court environment, the role of review reports, how reviews are conducted in practice, the sources and impact of support, and women's perspectives on what meaningful support and progress looks like. The findings are contextualised through a literature review and underpinned by an account of the methods used.

The findings show that while PSCs offer potential for a more engaging and supportive court experience, much of the meaningful support women received came from external services, particularly Probation and Women's Centres. The emotional and practical support provided by these agencies was essential in helping women navigate the realities of their lives. Importantly, the report identifies both systemic barriers and opportunities for reform. It notes the challenges associated with stigmatising and often intimidating court environments and emphasises the need for more collaborative and flexible approaches to PSC reviews. It also underscores the importance of involving multi-agency partners in the review process and providing women with choice, agency, and respect in setting goals and accessing support.

For practitioners, this report is intended as a practical tool to inform and enhance practice. It highlights what is working well, where improvements are needed, and critically, how PSCs can become more responsive and meaningful for women. The reflections and recommendations within are rooted in women's experiences and are designed to support a learning culture that places women's voices and needs at the centre of future PSC development.

The insights and recommendations highlight the value of centring women's voices in system design and delivery and make a clear case for PSCs to evolve into truly supportive, holistic spaces where women are seen, heard, and supported to make sustainable change. This report is an opportunity to reflect on practice, address gaps, and collectively step towards a more effective and compassionate model of justice. For policymakers and leaders, it offers an evidence-based foundation for advancing gender-responsive reform.

2. Understanding the Evidence: A Contextual Review of Problem-Solving Courts for Women

This review provides a concise summary of the key research relevant to the development, implementation and evaluation of PSCs for women. The review aims to provide contextual information and support stakeholders by focusing on practical insights to support policy and service development in Greater Manchester. The review draws on national and international evidence, highlighting key themes and considerations to inform gender-responsive and trauma-informed considerations with an emphasis on practice-orientated findings.

2.1 Why Gender-Responsive Justice?

The high and complex levels of trauma experienced by women who come into contact with the criminal justice system are widely recognised. Women criminalised by the state have often experienced distinctive social and structural challenges, including trauma, abuse and poverty (Corston, 2007; Prison Reform Trust, 2017). Compared to men who are criminalised, they are more likely to have spent time in care, suffer from depression, attempt suicide, self-harm, report drug and alcohol problems, be sole carers of children and be victims of domestic abuse; experiences that often intersect and are drivers behind criminalisation (Masson and Booth, 2022). In recognition of this, gender-responsive approaches have been embedded within policy frameworks, including the Female Offender Strategy (MOJ, 2018), the Concordat on Women in or at risk of contact with the Criminal Justice System (MOJ, 2020).

Commitments to divert women from the justice system and support them to serve sentences in the community successfully, alongside a drive to reduce immediate short-term custodial sentences, have seen the emergence of a Whole Systems Approach (WSA) in several regions. These approaches centre multi-agency working and the coordination of support to meet the needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system. The Greater Manchester WSA, established in 2014, now sees an alliance of 9 women's centres across the 10 boroughs of Greater Manchester providing gender-specific, holistic support. Working in partnership with Greater Manchester Probation Service (GMPS), the WSA

aims to provide support at arrest, sentence and upon release from custody. Evaluations of this approach have shown that collective, women-only spaces can contribute to positive and progressive trajectories in women's lives (Kinsella et al., 2018).

2.2 The Role of Problem-Solving Courts

PSCs are a relatively recent development within the UK, having gained popularity in the US in the 1980s (King, 2011). Underpinned by tripartite principles of rehabilitation, therapeutic jurisprudence, and problem-oriented policing these distinctive courts form a model that seeks to respond to individuals' criminogenic needs in a collaborative, judicial manner (Centre for Justice Innovation, 2021). Whilst there is no singular model or definition of PSCs, their features include procedural justice, accountability and judicial monitoring, specialisation, and collaborative intervention and supervision (Bowen and Whitehead, 2015; Kaplan et al., 2018; Centre for Innovation and Justice, 2018). Philosophically, therapeutic jurisprudence operates as the centering notion for PSCs. This principle, drawn from psychology and mental health law, recognises the "therapeutic and anti-therapeutic consequences of laws, legal rules, and legal actions" (Nolan, 2001: 185). Its influence has been described as "cutting edge" (Kawalek, 2020), and consequently, the consideration of the human effects of the law is now a well-established mode of its application (McIvor, 2009; Goldberg, 2011; Kawalek, 2020; Armstrong, 2022). Operationally, PSCs aim to improve public safety, promote trust in the justice system, reduce recidivism and produce more positive outcomes for people that have offended (Bowen and Whitehead, 2015).

Globally, drug courts have formed the most typical and common focus of PSCs, however their remit has expanded to include domestic violence, mental health, alcohol, homelessness and indigenous sentencing; with evaluations demonstrating some effectiveness (Nolan, 2001; McIvor, 2011; Harwin, et al., 2011; Rossman et al., 2011; Ward, 2014). In the UK, Specialist Domestic Violence Courts formed the first operational PSCs in 2005, swiftly followed by drug courts and iterations of housing and justice courts (Kerr et al., 2011; Ministry of Justice, 2013; Crown Prosecution Service, 2014). Evaluative literature in the UK is under-developed in comparison to other jurisdictions, though there are some examples reporting positive qualitative results (Kerr et al., 2011; Harwin et al., 2011; Winstone and Pakes, 2010; McIvor, 2011; Ward, 2014). Drug courts have been particularly successful in their implementation and have reported cost-effective success in treating people with addictions that have committed low-level offences (Kerr et al., 2011). More broadly, the current literature suggests that though the effectiveness of PSCs varies, they can be successful in their ability to implement

coordinated, multi-agency responses and improve outcomes for victims and people convicted of criminal offences (Cook et al., 2006; Bowen et al., 2014). Some of the challenges include individual factors, such as motivations of stakeholders involved and the ability of staff to build rapport (Kawalek, 2021). Additionally, the evidence base for the long-term outcomes of PSCs is unclear (Roberts, 2015).

2.3 Problem-Solving Courts for Women

PSCs for women are gaining increased attention as an innovative, gender-responsive alternative to custody, despite a relatively limited evidence base. There have been calls to develop gender-informed research on PSC approaches (Birkett, 2019; Lightowlers and Benefer, 2022) yet empirical evidence on their impact, particularly work which centres the lived experiences of women navigating these courts, remains sparse. Despite the absence of empirical data on reoffending or other measurable outcomes, these courts have been frequently referenced as promising trauma-informed interventions in the lives of women (Bowen and Whitehead, 2015). While some data suggests the Greater Manchester WSA may be linked to reductions in proven reoffending rates¹ (Kinsella et al., 2018), the evaluation authors urged caution in interpreting these statistical findings. Importantly, the PSC pathway through to WSA represented a small portion of referrals, 6% in the first year, dropping to 2% by the end of the evaluation period. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the particular role and impact of PSCs from this dataset. Whilst staff involved in the PSC at the time praised the court's strong initial multi-agency commitment, calling it a "gold standard," later concerns were raised about the potential for punitive "up-tariffing".

More recent reports have examined PSCs for women at system level, drawing insights from national and international models (Armstrong and Minson, 2025; Minson et al., 2025). These reports highlight the positive potential of some common features, including judicial continuity, collaboration, non-adversarial processes, opportunities for meaningful progress, and the prioritisation of holistic support. Crucially, this work argues that whilst PSC approaches can centre relationships, focus on individual and systemic well-being, and show promise in tackling the root causes of offending, the evidence base surrounding their operation and efficacy for women still needs to be developed (Armstrong and Minson, 2025; Minson et al., 2025). Caution and consideration of the potential challenges of PSCs for women have, again, included concerns around net widening and 'up-tariffing', which would mean

¹ The evaluation utilises the Ministry of Justice definition of proven reoffending as any offence committed in a 1 year follow up period that received a court conviction, caution, reprimand or warning in the 1 year follow up or a further 6 month waiting period.

women would be subject to additional surveillance for low-level offences², and we know that court spaces can be particularly problematic for women (Darley and Waite, 2025; Birkett, 2021). Additional operational challenges may arise from regional differences in women's needs and available resources, compounded by ongoing staffing and resource pressures within both HM Probation Service and HM Courts & Tribunals Service at national and regional levels. These challenges may also be shaped by intersectional inequalities, with some evidence indicating that women from Black, Asian and minoritised backgrounds may be underrepresented in accessing some women's centres (Kinsella et al., 2018; Lightowlers and Benefer, 2022; Padmanabhan, 2025).

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) is currently piloting three Intensive Supervision Courts (ISCs) that operate as forms of PSCs, including one dedicated specifically to women in Birmingham. Interim findings from the ongoing MoJ process evaluation indicate early promise in the model's potential to strengthen multidisciplinary collaboration and coordination (Ministry of Justice, 2024). However, insights into the specific needs and lived experiences of women remain limited at this stage. While the evaluation included data on 31 women subject to the ISC for women between July 2023 and January 2024, only two women were interviewed directly. As such, the majority of qualitative findings reflect the views of staff who, while offering valuable operational perspectives, may present more favourable interpretations and have different experiences than those of women engaging with the ISC. Further research that centres the voices of women themselves will be vital to fully assess the gender-responsive and trauma-informed ambitions of these models.

2.4 The Greater Manchester Model

The Greater Manchester PSC for women is the most well established and longest running model, launching in 2014 and originating as an alternative to custody (Deacon, 2023). The model forms part of the region's Whole System Approach and aims to address the needs of women within the criminal justice system by providing a holistic, gender-responsive alternative to sentencing for women facing medium to high-level community or suspended sentence orders, or short custodial sentences. It combines support from Women's Centres, Probation services, and community-based support, alongside judicial oversight to help women comply with their sentences and address underlying needs. The approach focuses on rehabilitation and risk through a collaborative, multi-agency model.

² It should be noted at this point that women are already routinely 'up tariffed' with most women in prison serving sentences for non-violent offences (Prison Reform Trust, 2025).

As part of this, women are required to attend regular review hearings, which are conducted at either one of 3 Magistrates Courts: Greater Manchester and Salford Magistrates Courts, Stockport Magistrates Courts or Bolton Magistrates Courts. The review hearings are often held remotely using Cloud Video Platform (CVP), during which women will attend the Women's Centres and be connected to the Courtroom through secure video conferencing. This form of hearing is used to accommodate the needs of women who struggle with travel, childcare, or have anxiety about attending court. The reviews aim to be informal, and strengths based and centre round the discussion of a report prepared by the Probation practitioner updating the Bench of Magistrates on the woman's progress. Discussions often focus the progress of women on their orders, alongside goals which are set at the first review hearing. Failure to attend these reviews should not result in a punitive outcome, such as breach. However, it was noted on several occasions during the research that some partners would request and/or suggest that reviews be made alongside Probation appointments in order for attendance to become mandatory. Additionally, women we spoke to almost consistently believed non-attendance would result in breach and a prison sentence. Once the period of the order is complete, women are able to continue accessing the Women's Centres for support.

There are several partners involved in the PSC, each playing a key role in the process:

Figure 1: Key Stakeholders in PSC

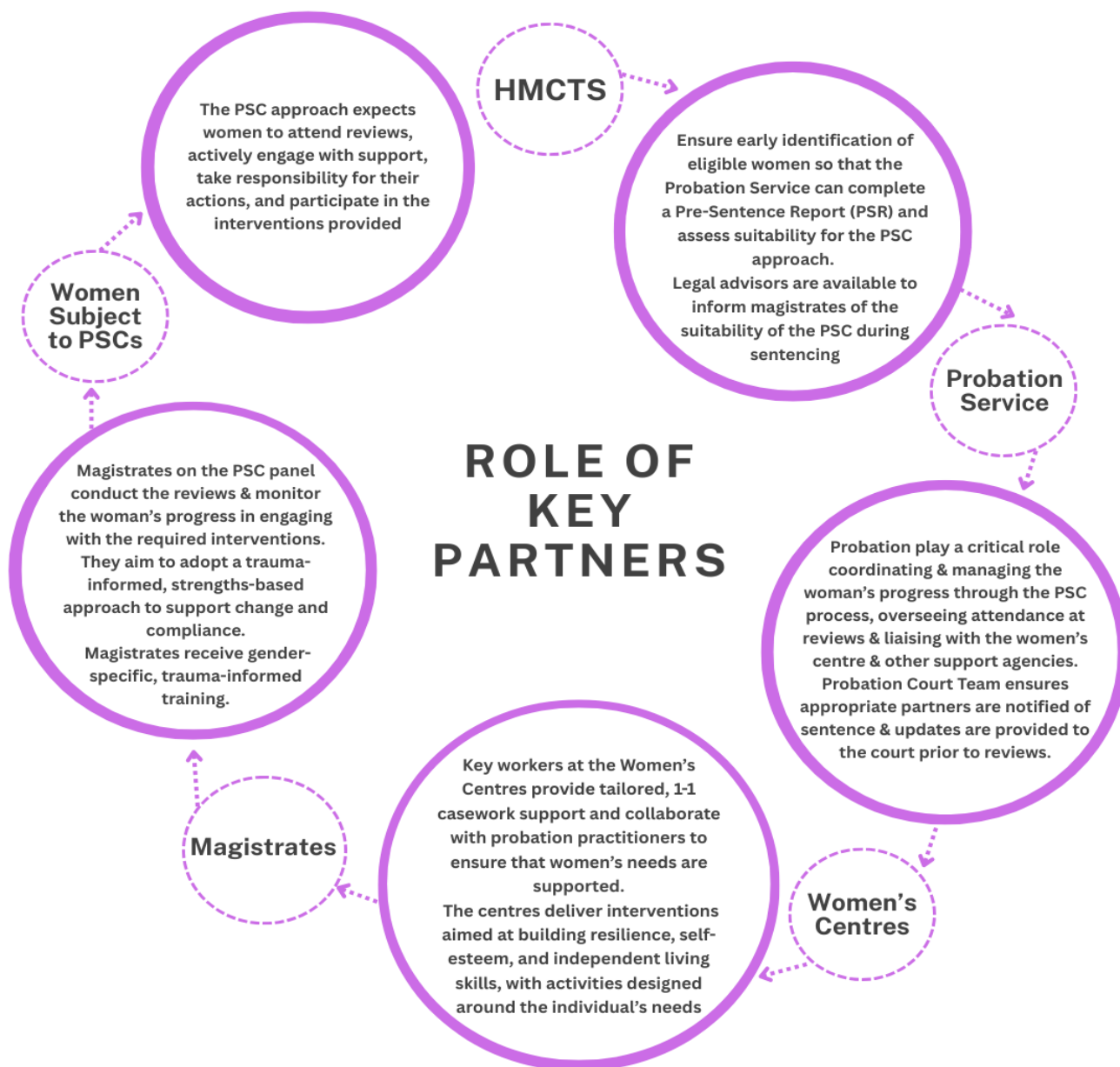
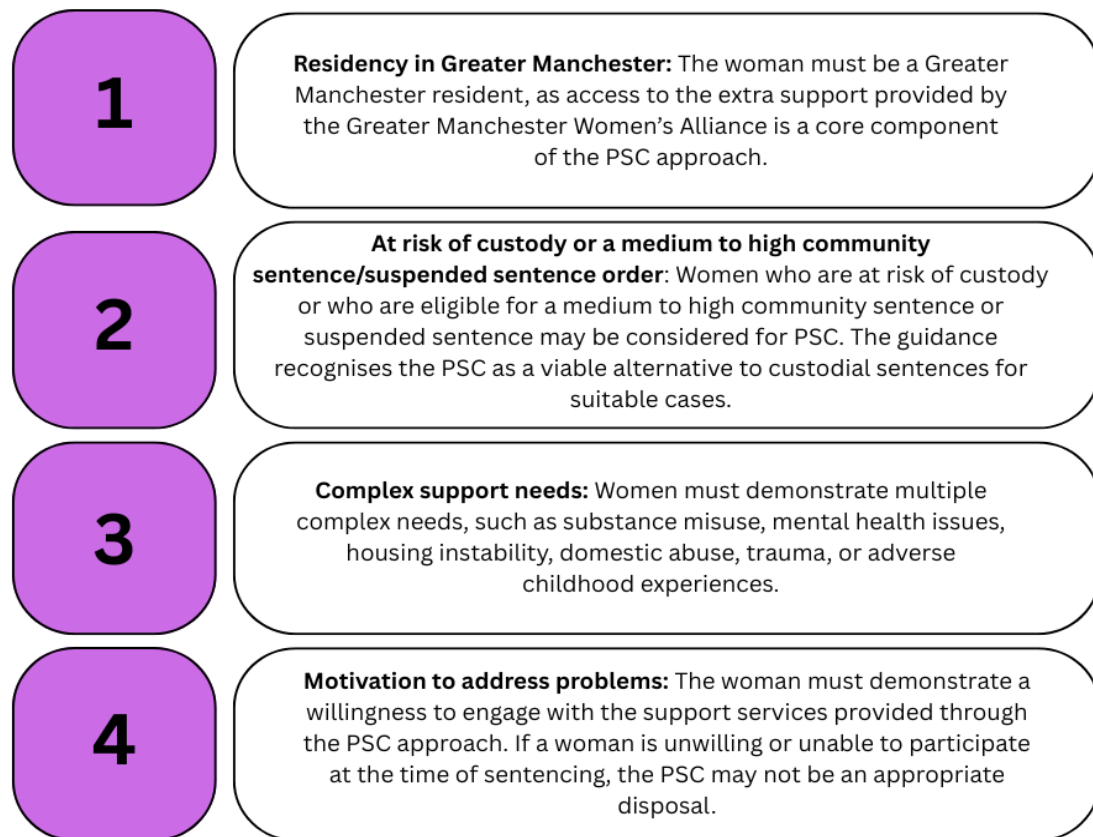


Figure 2: PSC Eligibility Criteria

Greater Manchester PSC for women applies the following eligibility criteria:



In practice, commencement and referral begins once a woman has received a Community Order or Suspended Sentence order. These begin with an induction at the Women's Centre where a needs assessment is conducted, usually within 10 days, in order to determine the level of support needed. Women are assigned a Probation practitioner who works closely with the Women's Centre caseworker to ensure support and attendance is coordinated throughout the order. Women receive interventions and support, which can be both in a group or on a 1-1 basis. Probation Services provide offence-focused work and generic support within the Women's Centres and these sessions are often counted as Rehabilitation Activity Requirement (RAR) days. The sessions can involve a range of interventions, such as:

- **FIRS (Fostering Identity, Resilience & Self Esteem):** A series of 8 group sessions aimed at restoring self-identity and self-esteem in women with histories of trauma and harmful

behaviours like substance misuse or violence.

- First Steps to Change: A toolkit focusing on wellbeing, trauma, relationships, parenting, and problem-solving, designed for all women involved in the PSC.
- Pathways to Change: A strengths-based toolkit for women convicted of sexual offences, focusing on skill development and strategies to support desistance.

Women can also undertake unpaid work placements, including independent roles at women's centres, charity shops, or self-identified placements where appropriate. Women who attend PSC may also be subject to additional concurrent Community Order treatment requirements as part of their Community Order or Suspended Sentence Order. This could include either of the following three requirements: a Drug Rehabilitation Requirement; an Alcohol Treatment Requirement or a Mental Health Treatment Requirement.

3. Creating a Strength Based Research Design

The overarching aim of this research was to explore the impact and experience of PSCs through a trauma-informed and strength-based lens. To do this, the perspectives of 12 Women, 6 Magistrates and 6 Probation staff were included, to better appreciate the experience of PSCs and the role they play in supporting women at risk of entering prison. Additionally, this research considered the impact of the court environment and how this was experienced by women who accessed the PSC reviews.

To achieve this, the research set out to explore the following research questions:

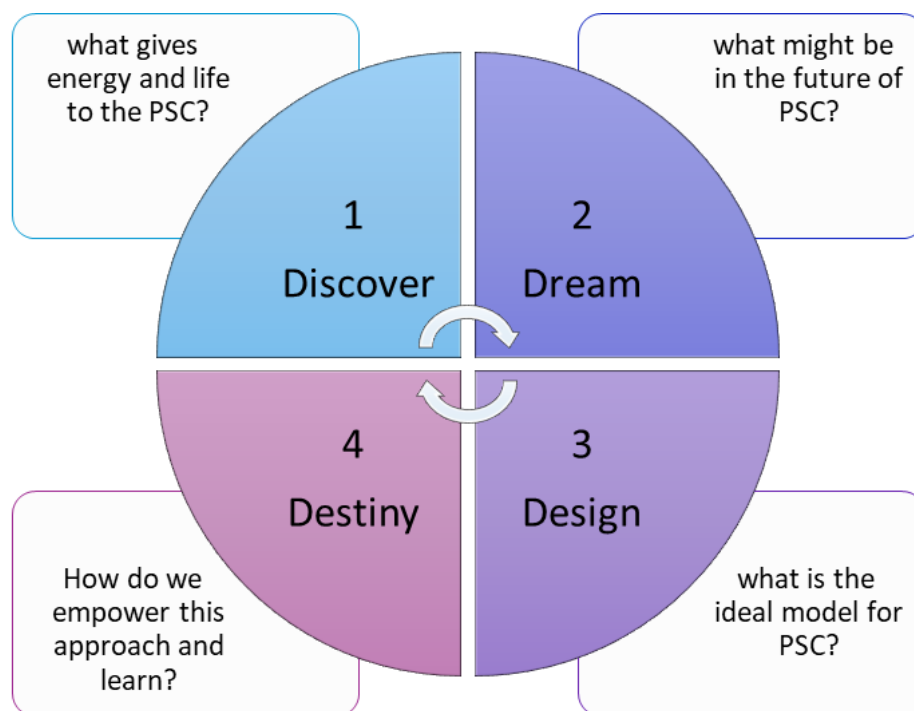
1. What are the perceptions and experiences of women participating in Problem-Solving Courts?
2. What are the perceptions and experiences of Probation staff who support women eligible for Problem-Solving Courts?
3. What is the role of the Magistrate within the Problem-Solving Court process?

3.1 Strength Based Evaluation Strategy

This qualitative evaluation adopted a strength-based approach to the methodological research design, through the use of Appreciative Inquiry. This method was selected, due to its successful use in developing and sustaining large-scale organisational change (Drew and Wallis, 2014). Appreciative Inquiry has been utilised successfully across a variety of criminal justice institutional settings, including drug courts, probation trusts and police custody (Fischer et al., 2007; Robinson et al., 2012; Skynns et al., 2022). Taking into account the six core values of trauma-informed practice, it was important to engage those involved in the PSC process, in a discussion of the strengths of the approach, with a view to enhance and build from this position. Drew and Wallis (2014:5) describe this as a 'glass half-full rather than half empty' approach to evaluation, which can influence positive change based on existing elements which are working. This model offers an alternative to problem and inadequacy focussed evaluation strategies, which can create tension and anxiety related to potential critical scrutiny.

The research design embedded the 4D cycle to include affirmative topics within the design of the interview questions for Women, Magistrates and Probation staff (Trajkovski., et al 2013). The Appreciative Inquiry approach is envisaged as a cyclical and continuous reflective process to empower organisational evolution and change. The cyclical and continuous reflective process mirrors the approach set out in the trauma informed implementation journey (SAMSHA, 2023).

Figure 3: The 4 D's of Appreciative Inquiry



The initial phase of the model focuses on the review of what the PSCs are currently and what has been achieved within this time. Secondly, the dream phase supported an affirmative exploration of the future possibilities and how this model could grow through co-collaboration of voice. The design phase enabled an appreciation of what needs to happen, in order for this approach to grow from the learning and reflections. The final phase supported a process of action planning and paving affirmative new ways of working within the PSC approach.

3.2 Trauma Informed Research Design

When considering the appropriate trauma-informed approach to this research, we began by considering how the evaluation framework could support the safety and well-being of those who would be participating. Firstly, the researchers made four commitments relevant to trauma-informed approaches (SAMHSA, 2023).

- To realise the prevalence and impact of trauma within the experiences of participants
- To recognise the signs and communications of trauma
- To respond to this by integrating trauma knowledge within the research design
- To do no harm and minimise re-traumatisation

It was important to consider the values associated with a trauma informed approach within the evaluation research design. To capture the experience of the trauma informed values within PSCs, we structured all sets of interview questions and environmental analysis documentation on the following guidelines:

Figure 4: Trauma Informed Values



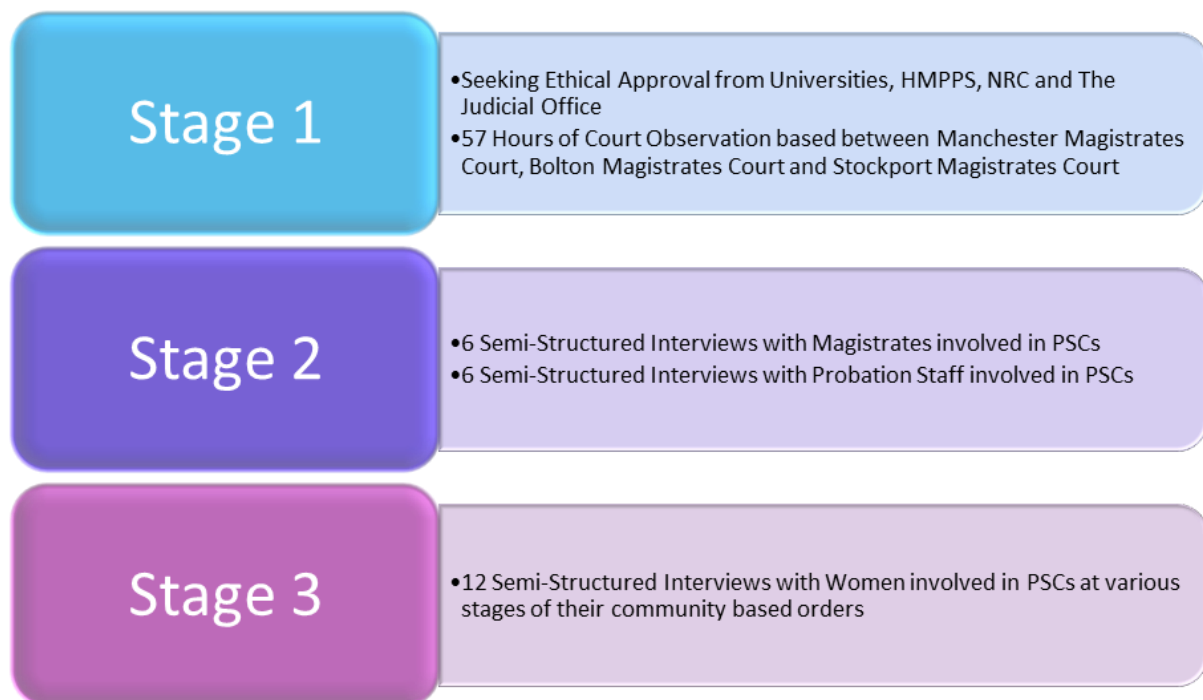
These values supported the overall structure of the data collection documentation and the approach taken by researchers to maximise the values within the interactions with all participant groups. Through adopting a lens of trauma, adversity and cultural experience within this research, we have been able to better understand the experiences of all participants in a way which recognises their lives and/or roles and how this shapes their experience of PSCs. This includes appreciating varied histories of trauma, acknowledging the impact of working with trauma and hearing disclosures of trauma, as well comprehending the complex institutional challenges and powerlessness associated with navigating the Criminal Justice System.

3.3 PSC Evaluation Methodology

This qualitative evaluation was completed over a period of 12 months. The methodology included periods of court observation and semi-structured interviews with all participant groups. Semi-structured interviews enhance the opportunity for unforeseen information that may be overlooked in a structured interview by allowing for flexibility and the adoption of a conversational approach which can enhance the production of knowledge (Barbour and Schostak, 2005; Holstein and Gubrium, 2012). However, they also create the guided conversation needed in order to address the research questions. Additionally, this approach demonstrates an awareness of the subjective nature of knowledge, therefore acknowledging approaches which appreciate participants as knowledgeable agents (Gelsthorpe and Morris, 1988).

To address the research questions, the research employed a three staged approach as a means of increasing triangulation opportunities within the data collection and during the subjective context of analysis.

Figure 5: Three Stages of PSC Data Collection



Stage 1 of the research began after adhering to University Ethical approval processes. This involved researchers observing a minimum of two full days at each of the three courts which participate in Greater Manchester's PSCs. Researchers accessed the public gallery of the court rooms, whilst awaiting HMPPS NRC approval to interview Women and Probation staff, and Judicial Office approval to engage with Magistrates. During this stage, the researchers observed HMPPS specialist training on Women in the Criminal Justice System delivered on Microsoft teams to staff involved in PSCs.

Stage 2 involved a purposive approach which was designed to understand the experiences and perceptions of 6 Probation staff and 6 Magistrates involved in the PSCs. Participation was voluntary and participants were recruited through word of mouth during court observations where researchers discussed the project and handed out leaflets to support engagement. Interested participants were contacted via email, provided with the relevant Participant Information Sheet and were asked to consider taking part in an interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. Interested participants responded back with their ideal dates and times and researchers conducted these interviews over Microsoft Teams in an environment selected by participants to preserve anonymity and enhance convenience.

Interview guides were developed following a review of trauma-informed and gendered justice literature. Three separate interview guides were designed for the stages, one for Probation

employees, one for Magistrates and one for Women. This was to reflect the differing nature of their roles, interactions and experiences in the process.

Stage 3 involved a similar participant recruitment strategy, this time to avoid association with the PSC process (in court and at Probation appointments) and to avoid placing any pressure on women to take part in the research. We relied heavily on the Probation staff and Women's Centres involved in PSCs to connect us with women who were interested in taking part. They kindly supported researchers to hand out relevant information and leaflets. Researchers created a poster and leaflet with a QR code, taking women to an interactive video where we could introduce ourselves and share additional information on the purpose of the research and how to get in contact with us. Interested participants were contacted by their preferred method of contact which varied from telephone calls, email and in person discussions when women were attending their nearest Women's Centre. Interviews took place at the venue of choice for women, this included meeting 2 women online via Microsoft Teams meetings, and speaking to another 10 women in person interviews, which took place in a variety of private spaces at locations including a community library, recovery house and within women's Centres.

3.4 Data Analysis Strategy

Reflexive Thematic Analysis was selected to honour the researcher's commitment to theoretical knowingness and transparency within the coding and analysis of data. The intention was to recognise and take ownership of the active role the researcher plays when generating knowledge production and theoretical assumption (Braun, Clarke and Weate, 2016). This interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis is flexible for researchers to seek patterns and connections within their data. Whilst there is not a consistently agreed implementation strategy to this analysis strategy, there is acknowledgement of the researcher's analysis of the data, the theoretical assumptions within the analysis and consideration of the skills of the researcher in order to achieve this (Braun and Clarke, 2020). Researchers are actively discouraged from attempting to label their coding as accurate or reliable, and collaborative research is encouraged to seek richer considerations of the meaning of the data (Byrne, 2022). The creators of this analysis strategy argue that researchers should strive towards "thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process" (Braun and Clarke 2019: 594).

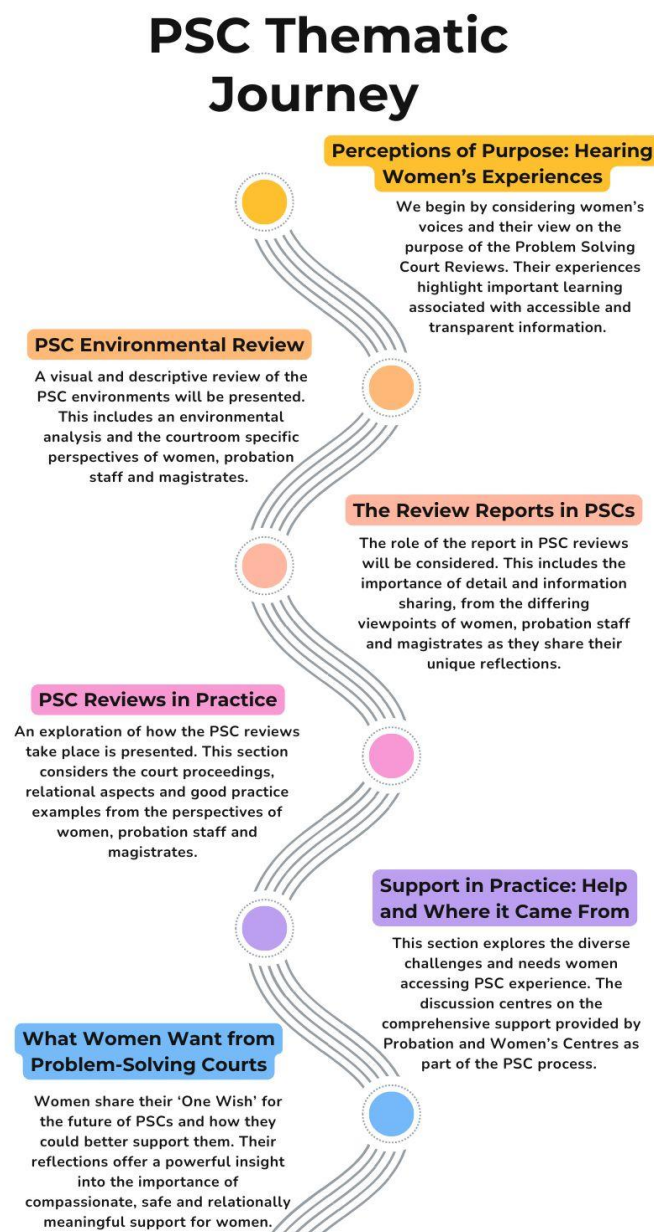
The observational data analysis was conducted within similar timeframes, and with regular collaborative meetings scheduled between the researchers, to discuss emerging themes and to support a more nuanced reading of the data. The layout of each Magistrates Court room was developed from sketches as well as researcher memory and experiences of the spaces used during observations of the PSCs. The environmental review and walkthroughs were conducted independently by both researchers, to capture as much sensory information associated with the environment and journey to the allocated court rooms.

The strategy to analyse the written observational documentation and the transcripts from interviews was iterative, collaborative and involved reflexive discussion between researchers. Both researchers independently coded the data for semantic and latent codes to begin, to honour the key discussions emerging from the interviews and observational data. The second iteration of coding involved a more precise and evaluative consideration of the meaning behind the codes, whereby researchers independently created tables of emerging themes, justifications/overviews of the meaning associated and examples from the data sets. The final iteration of analysis involved the researchers collaboratively exploring their individual coding, themes and analytical work, in order to generate patterns and to develop the interpretive stories and to question and interrogate the assumptions we make to support a more thoughtful thematic, generative process (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Due to the creative and explorative approach, which included reflexive conversations between researchers, this was a time consuming, but worthwhile process to honour and represent the voices and experiences emerging from the data.

4. The Reports Thematic Journey

This infographic provides a thematic overview of the contents and focus of the report findings. The report is structured in a way which reflects the journey of PSCs from the voices of Women, perspectives of Probation staff and the viewpoints of Magistrates. The reflections of those involved within the PSC process, highlight important learning and diverse insight into the experiences associated with the reviews.

Figure 6: The Thematic Journey through PSCs



5. Perceptions of Purpose: Hearing Women's Experiences

Introductory conversations surrounding the purpose of PSCs should ideally take place during the process of writing Pre-Sentence Reports with women, prior to a Community Order or Suspended Sentence Order commencing. At this stage, women should be introduced to the PSC review process, with transparency at the heart of the conversation, to ensure women have a clear understanding of expectations. It is important to recognise women's realities at this stage, which will be fearful and uncertain as they await sentencing. Therefore, it is valuable to consider a variety of ways and appropriately timed opportunities to discuss PSCs with women, to enable a more robust understanding of the purpose and how women can be supported throughout the process. In addition, it should be emphasised that women will be engaging with multi-agency partners including Magistrates, Women's Centres and Probation staff during the course of the reviews and how this approach may be of benefit to them. Women who are at risk of entering the criminal justice system, have varied histories, experiences and goals for their future, which highlights the significance of adopting a sensitive and person-centred approach to the reviews. From hearing the perspectives of women, it is clear that there is a need for greater clarity associated with the purpose of the PSCs, in order to support more informed and meaningful interactions within the reviews. The emphasis being placed on how best to support women engaging within this process.

To conclude each interview, women were asked to describe their experiences of PSCs in three words. The below word cloud includes each word used by women.

Figure 7: PSC Experiential Word Cloud



There were varied reflections and perspectives within the group. When women reflected on the positive experiences, they focussed on the relationships with probation and women centre staff, as well as the supportive conversations with Magistrates.

When women were asked about their understanding of PSCs, some women shared that they were uncertain of the PSC process and purpose for some time.

“It’s took me three or four, it’s took me three appointments to have actually understood what it’s about.” Joanne

The lack of clarity for women could disrupt meaningful engagement, if they do not have transparency over the process and expectations, as they become a passive actor within the dynamic.

Similarly, some women expressed uncertainty about the role of Magistrates in the process, as well as how the content discussed during the review differs from what is covered in probation meetings

“Because sometimes I just think like it’s a waste of space because the goal setting and things like that I feel like it’s nothing that you can’t do with your probation officer because you could set it up with the probation officer and she could review me maybe every week or every month, when you go in.” Gemma

Women were conscious of the input of Magistrates within the reviews. The lack of established relationships and rapport made it difficult for women to feel fully comfortable. In addition, women felt that because they were being directed by Magistrates to speak to their probation officer about matters raised, this added to their uncertainty of the purpose.

“Because you don’t really work with them ... again you’ll have a conversation with them and they say do this, do that but ‘go to your probation officer and they’ve got all the information, they’re ...’ so you don’t work with that sort of side of it. And I keep saying the same things ‘cos I know – I do it meself – I just don’t understand the point of it and this is what I’m ... ‘cos you don’t work with them, you don’t have no dealings with them three people. The other two people that was next to them they never spoke. I don’t know why they were there ‘cos they never spoke, he did all the speaking in the middle but that’s it, you don’t ... to me you don’t work with ‘em, you know what I mean. Other than attending the appointments that’s the only time that I’ve been up

and you had any sort of work with 'em and then that's it, it's somebody else next time."

Christina

This also demonstrates the impact of the inconsistent Magistrates panel and the worth of trying to assign Magistrates to women's cases to support the building of rapport.

As women were being asked to attend an additional appointment for the review, this also added to women's questions surrounding the purpose, if the discussions with Magistrates are similar to that already taking place with Probation staff.

"And it just feels it's like an additional punishment. Kind of like, yeah, Another appointment, you know. Because like I said, anything that you discuss with the judges and any help that you need, you're already discussing it with the probation officer. So I don't kind of not understanding. What? What? What the what? The aim is." **Grace**

The added commitment, along with the formal nature of regularly attending court, was a major concern for the women, leading them to question the value of the approach—especially if it was something they felt anxious or fearful about.

"It's quite an intimidating thing to have to do. Yeah, it is intimidating. Yeah, for me, I find it intimidating, so I've just not enjoyed, it at all, and although they're not mean to me, you know, they haven't been mean to me, not rude or horrible, I just find it very unnecessary, when I'm already doing what I was doing in the beginning anyway, I'd already giving up drinking and I've already been going to AA or I'd be going to see CGL so I had already been doing those things before the problem-solving court, so then I have to report to them and tell them the same things over and over again and then it's, you know, I think they could have just sent me a questionnaire and I would have gone, yeah, done that, done that, there ya go." **Natalie**

Women discussed working with multiple agencies and organisations in order to seek the most appropriate support for them. The additional burden of another appointment, combined with the austere environment it takes place in, were undermining women's perception of purpose in the PSC reviews. Additional transparency and discussion surrounding the relevancy to women's needs could enhance trust in the process and could in turn, support increased engagement and attendance.

During the research, one woman showed researchers two letters of correspondence she received from her designated Magistrates court dated May 2024 and June 2024. The letter was formal; it included the Royal Coat of Arms and was formatted in the following way:

Notice of review hearing

The next review hearing of your Suspended Sentence Order will be on

Date, time and Magistrate Court Location and Address, Telephone number.

You must attend the hearing.

Date of the letter.

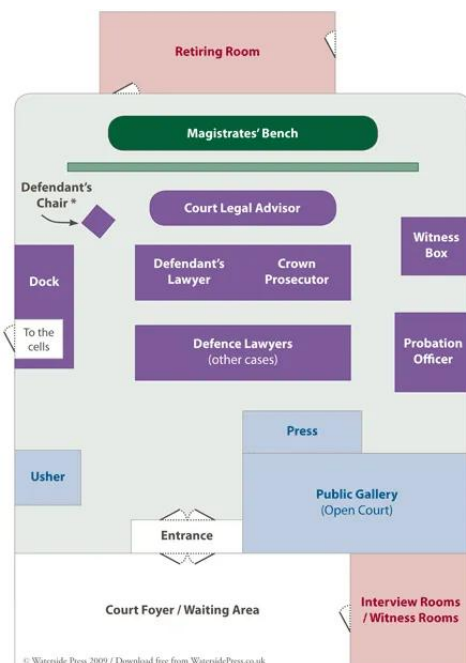
Women received this official court letter headed document between one month and three weeks prior to their PSC Review date. The letter did not take into account women who had previously authorised attendance via video link with their Probation officer, and this caused concern and worry for women. The language used suggests the review is a formal review of their original sentence, as opposed to being part of the PSC review process. This lack of clarity for women and the concerns which build up each month following receipt of this letter, begin the process of apprehension associated with court attendance.

6. PSC Environmental Review

The review of the environment began at the entrance to the Magistrates court. For women attending the court space in person, it was important to review an accurate journey through the security searching process upon entry to the establishment. This included interactions with court staff during searching and screening processes prior to seeking out the allocated courtroom. An environmental walkthrough took place to consider the sensory experience of the journey and navigation to the courtroom. The review also considered the waiting room for women and how many people women would come into contact with during their walk to the PSC room. When observing the courts the researchers considered the four commitments and the core values relevant to Trauma Informed Approaches as outlined earlier in the Trauma Informed Research Design section of this report (see Section 3.2 p.17). The presentation of the environmental findings will be structured in line with the walkthrough format and will feature an example room layout for each of the three courtrooms observed.

The traditional Magistrates Court layout example below (Waterside Press 2020), provides a visual comparison to use alongside the presented adaptations and room layouts reviewed during research observations at the three Greater Manchester Magistrates Courts.

Figure 8: Traditional Magistrate Courtrooms



Example of a courtroom layout

* Use of the dock or a chair for the defendant can vary: see *Dock* in the *Glossary*. A less formal arrangement is likely re youth or family work, *Chapters 8 and 9*

Traditional court rooms feature a Magistrates bench whereby three magistrates preside at a higher height differential to others within the courtroom. There are specific spaces for legal teams, witnesses, Probation staff, defendants and the public.

6.1 Bolton Magistrates Court



Manchester Evening News (2022)

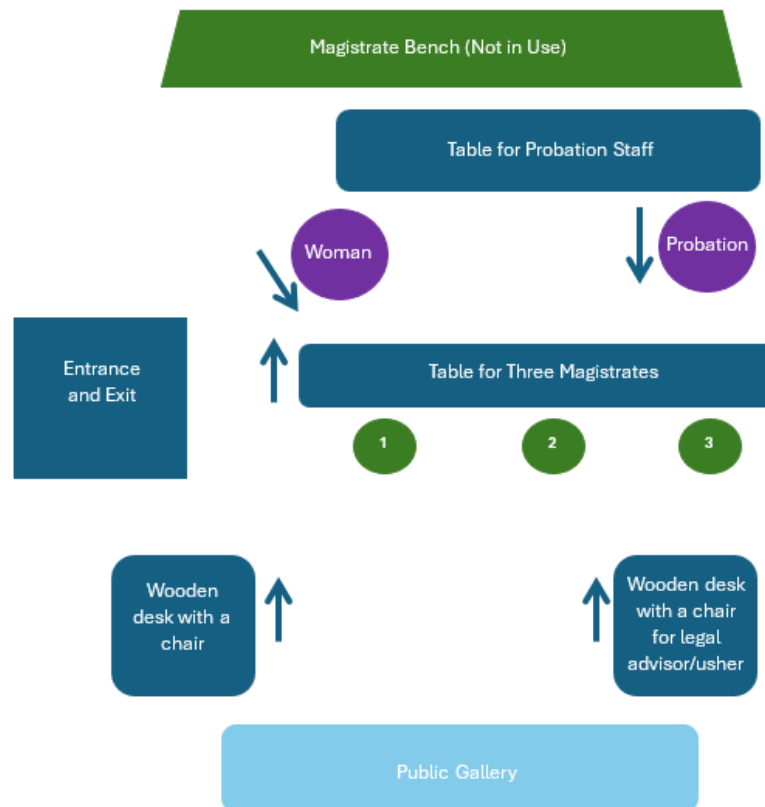
6.1.1 Entrance, Searching and Journey to the Waiting Room

The building itself is close to the town centre of Bolton, yet it is positioned privately, a couple of minutes walk away from the busy streets and members of the public. This court was having renovation works completed at the time and the entrance was a little narrower than usual, due to scaffolding. The sombre building is a traditional stone court with narrow windows that appear to be arbitrarily and unevenly placed around the building. The days where researchers observed Bolton PSC were quiet, entrances and walkways were clear and the searching processes were quick with warm welcomes and helpful staff to support the process. The PSC usher supported navigation to the private waiting area next door to the courtroom, traditionally used for witnesses and their accompanying friends/family, to increase privacy for women attending PSC. The waiting room was a bright and light space with reupholstered furniture. Women were met by the Probation staff member in the waiting area and together they walked into the courtroom to meet with the three Magistrates.

6.1.2 Courtroom Setup and Design

The arrows demonstrate the direction of the seating position of each person in the courtroom.

Figure 9: Bolton Magistrates Court PSC Room Layout from Research Observations



Once women arrive inside the courtroom, they are directed to a single seat which faces (but is not close to) a low level table which three Magistrates are sitting behind. The Probation staff member is seated a little away but to the left of the woman on a seat, also facing towards the Magistrates. The woman is seated close to the exit which is on the right hand side. The woman has her back to the Royal Coat of Arms and the Magistrate bench which is not in use but is still visible. There is equity within the height positionality of each person in the room. The single seat for women is positioned in a direction which can support communication with Magistrates. However, this seating position places women as a spotlight within the room which could feel intimidating due to the numerical imbalances of people within the review dynamic. Women are also facing out towards the public gallery which includes observers, researchers and the court usher. Women are not always introduced to the researcher sitting in the public gallery.

6.2 Manchester Magistrates Court



Manchester Evening News (2020)

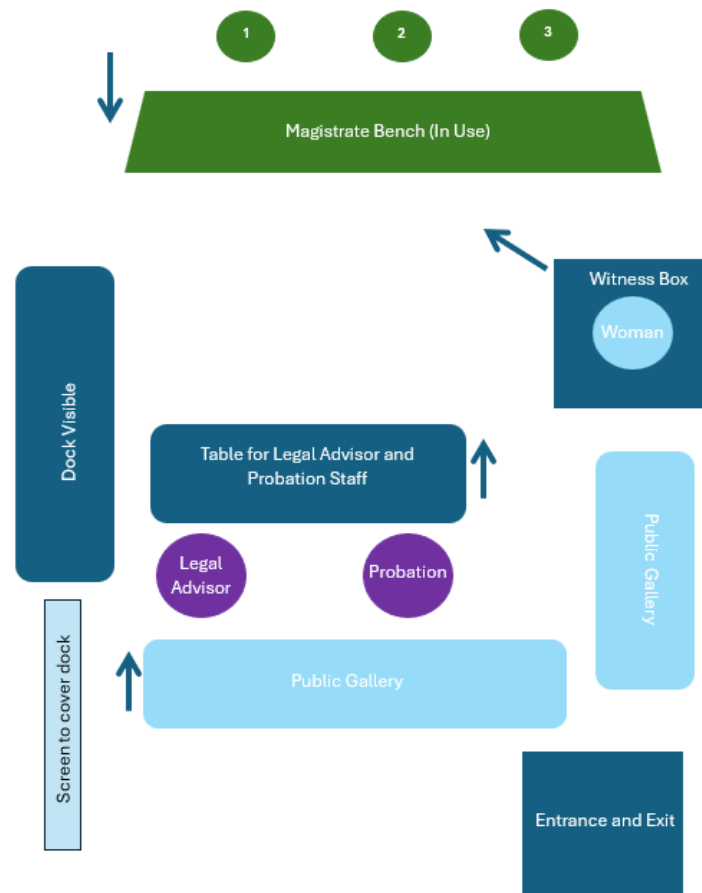
6.2.1 Entrance, Searching and Journey to the Waiting Room

The building is very centrally located and surrounding areas are busy with members of the public going about their daily activities. The building is more modern with large glass windows creating more opportunities for natural light. The building is tucked into a busy section of the city centre, surrounded by lots of restaurants and passersby. Access to the building is public and due to the size of the building, the entrance was always packed with people during our observations. Researchers walked through big groups of people and pillows of cigarette/vape smoke. Researchers passed police staff and security staff before entering an airport level of searching and scrutiny. Once this process was completed, we entered the huge formal setting, passing by the busy information station where we queued to find out which court room to head towards. After taking large escalators, a lift and walking through a variety of busy court waiting rooms, we arrived at the allocated PSC room. Ushers are present in the space, they walk quickly and appear very busy within the bustling and lively environment. It is likely that women will need to navigate a similar route to the PSC room that researchers did. The waiting room is bright with clinical but fabric seating and is located the furthest away from the busy open plan space. Women are greeted by the Probation staff sitting on the PSC and are welcomed into the courtroom.

6.2.2 Courtroom Setup and Design

The arrows demonstrate the direction of the seating position of each person in the courtroom.

Figure 10: Manchester Magistrates Court PSC Room Layout from Research Observations



Magistrates utilise the bench which is situated higher up and requires magistrates to look down towards the women who are directed to sit in the witness box³. The witness box faces the visible dock and has a box of tissues and a microphone, which women often lean towards when they respond to the Magistrates. To the left of the dock, is a small blue curtain on a rail, which could be used to partially cover the view of the dock. However, researchers did not see this in use during the observation periods. As women are facing Magistrates during the review, they need to turn their view away from

³ The courtroom used at Manchester Magistrates Court for the PSC reviews was an emergency alternative for a 2 year period to accommodate the Manchester Arena Inquiry. Since completing the observations, the PSC reviews have relocated to an equitable height model which incorporates a table discussion. The new space has not been reviewed within this report.

the table where the legal advisor and Probation staff member are positioned. Women also have their back towards both sections of the public gallery and the exit. On one occasion within observations a Magistrate wore dark sunglasses throughout the reviews and when speaking to women, which researchers noted, as this would likely not be tolerated inversely.

6.3 Stockport Magistrates and County Court



Manchester Evening News (2022)

6.3.1 Entrance, Searching and Journey to the Waiting Room

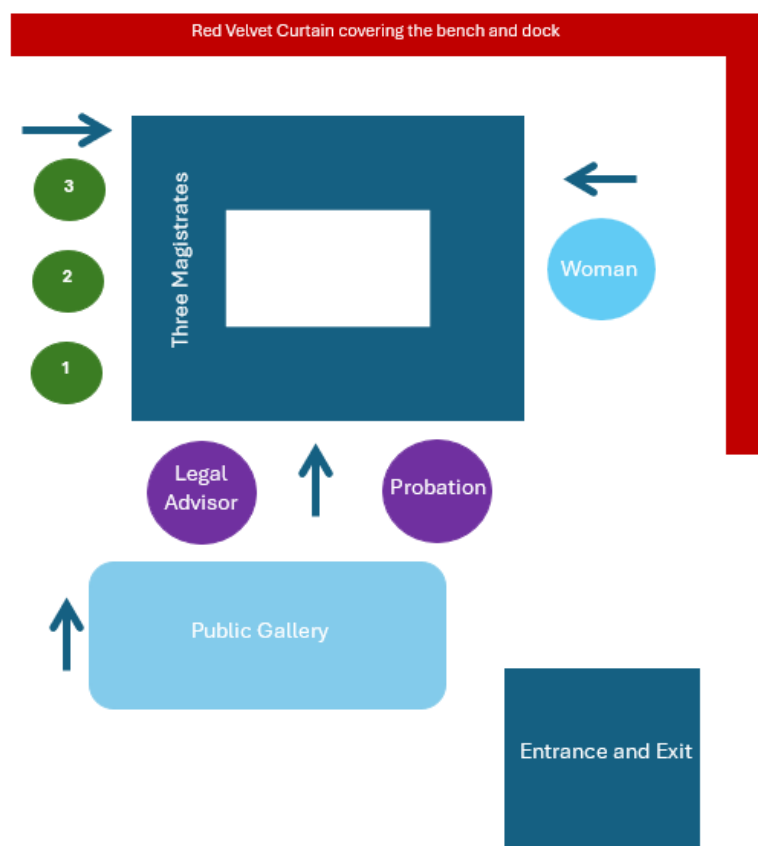
The building is very central to the town centre for ease of public transport links. The position of the court is set back away from the roadside, but still quite public in terms of access due to the busy nature of the town centre. The large windows, large brick work and grand pillar-like structure attached to the space paint an ominous aesthetic upon arrival. This is a busier court space and security searching is more invasive and daunting with less communication from the court staff. Women are directed up to the courtroom by security staff or court ushers, where they will need to take a large staircase or accessible lift to reach the appropriate floor. The stairs are often busy with ushers, legal representatives and other people who are attending their own court hearings or sentencing. Women will have to walk through busy waiting areas for alternative court rooms, before reaching the closest waiting room associated with the allocated PSC room. The waiting room is quiet upon arrival and is only used by women accessing PSC. The seats are metal and cold and the space is sunless and austere.

Women are greeted by the Probation staff member who is supporting the review process, who will walk into the court space with women and direct them to their seat.

6.3.2 Courtroom Setup and Design

The arrows demonstrate the direction of the seating position of each person in the courtroom.

Figure 11: Stockport Magistrates Court PSC Room Layout from Research Observations



Women are directed to a seat in the middle of a large table which is shaped in a square where all people are seated for the review. Women directly face the Magistrates and the Probation staff member, legal advisor and the public gallery are situated to the left. Behind and to the left hand side of the woman is a rich and thick red velvet curtain which is covering the sight of the Royal Coat of Arms, the Magistrates bench, witness box and the dock. There is a box of tissues in front of women on the table. The individual seat at the large table for women could be intimidating and does mimic a panel interview process. Women are not always introduced to the researcher sitting in the public gallery.

Given the visually and sensorily oppressive nature of these environments, it is hard to imagine how women can engage in psychologically and emotionally safe, meaningful, and relational conversations within the reviews. This is further impacted by the overlapping power imbalances, differing perspectives, and varied experiences that exist within such environments. It is clear to see that some good relational practice and symbolic adaptations have taken place within the spaces. Some of the thoughtful layout decisions, waiting area considerations and use of curtains, have attempted to neutralise the adverse sensory experiences of the courtroom space. However, court environments continue to embody numerous symbolically violent associations that can undermine key principles such as safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and equity for women. As a result, these settings cannot be fully associated with the core values of trauma-informed practice, and caution should be exercised when drawing such parallels.

6.4 Women's Experiences within the Environment

Women who have experienced PSCs shared a variety of challenges associated with the PSCs taking place within Magistrates Courts.

“At the end of the day you know that ... and I’m not saying magistrates are bad at all but they are magistrates, they’re there doing a job, but no. It’s not a situation or that environment where you could possibly have a trusting relationship with them because you don’t see ‘em and then you don’t have any contact with them before or after that ten minute so there’s no ... if you know what I mean. Again if you did want to or whatever, but at the end it’s going to be one of them ... probation officer ... there’s no ... they’re there just to do that ten-minute appointment and then that’s it, they’re not really bothered what ... it makes no difference to them whether I’m crying me eyes out or whether I’m breaching or whatever, they’re just there because they have to be for that sort of ten minutes. Just doing their job. And not in a bad way, don’t get me wrong, that’s what ... you know what I mean. There’s that many people you can’t have a relationship. It’s a professional space really in that sort of environment.” **Christina**

This highlights the challenge to establish trust and relational connection within the formality of the courtroom environment.

“I think it’s quite a scary experience, really, it’s not like you are walking in like Hiya, how are you, look at what i’ve done. It’s not like that, it’s very very very formal.” **Natalie.**

“But it is very formal, like the way they get you to stand in the box and all that, it is still very, very formal. It’s like having to go to Court every month, it’s not that great to be honest, they should probably make it a bit less formal, and I don’t understand why it needs to be that formal to be honest. It feels like you’re just going to Court and for some people going to Court is traumatizing do you know what I mean? Some people have been to Court for things that are not nice, they might have been raped and had to go to Court in the past and having to go there it might...it could trigger things for people who have been through things like that.” Nicola.

Women reported that the court environment is inherently traumatising, and returning to that setting for review proceedings can be a distressing and emotionally challenging experience.

“Well when I’m going into the court, yeah, it’s crazy because I feel like even though I’ve already been sentenced for what I’ve done, I feel like I’m still in a way being punished because I’m going back to that court, do you know what I mean, and I feel like I’m supposed to be able to be rehabilitated and to be actually like focus on not going into prison and stuff like that, but then when you go into them places it just gets it into your head like what have I done, am I in trouble and stuff like that.” Kim.

“Even just walking into a court, you don’t want anybody seeing you walking into a courtroom. Even in wigan, that’s my local area, I don’t want people keep seeing me walking into a courtroom thinking I’m in more trouble and like I say it could bring up bad memories or you don’t want to be in a court setting, ‘cos I don’t know many people that go to court other than for issues problems I think it should be done in more of a warm and safe environment like this, at probation, ‘cos it could be done ... they could all be done via a video link and I just don’t feel there’s no reason why these women have to go to a courtroom.” Gemma.

Women were associating going to court for the PSCs with prior court appearances and they often felt further punished. Women also shared feelings of fear and worry associated with their previous experiences in the space. Women were keen for the reviews to take place in an alternative more comfortable and neutral environment.

“I think if that problem-solving court was in a different building, not a court but it’d be less daunting. It’s just the same, just think that the ... it’s just the same. ‘Cos it does make it scarier ‘cos it’s in a court, an actual court, I think that’s why. But if it was put

somewhere like here it wouldn't be, just forget about it's in a court. Just think you're not gonna see a judge, seeing nice people, they're not the ones who are gonna sentence ya, they're the ones who wanna say you've been doing good and doing bad and at the end of the day you won't get sent down anyway, do you know what I mean?" Rachel.

"Like go in a room like say ages before the...don't do it in the Courts, do it in a room where they're sat there where it's a bit more comfortable...I reckon if they done it in a different way it would be a lot easier for people to...do you know what I mean co-operate and stuff, but it would be more easier like. When it is more comfortable like us, it's more comfortable isn't it?" Karen.

Women were very concerned about the court and courtroom spaces. This aligned with negative associations based on previous experiences attending court, including their original sentencing. This demonstrates the challenges associated with trying to engage women relationally within a stigmatising and emotionally and psychologically unsafe environment.

6.5 Magistrates Reflections of the Environment

Magistrates did recognise the concerns associated with the court spaces and the impact this could have on women.

"We have to sit in a formal court, so they're sitting in the dock. Well no, no, they're not sitting in a dock – apologies – they're sitting in a witness box. It can be a bit triggering that, having to come back here to the formal magistrates' court. Outside where they could be mixing with all sorts of people in the other courts, you know if they're coming from domestic violence they're going to be around men and we try to ... there's nothing we can do to control that, but just thinking now, what we have started doing is offering online reviews which means that they can go to the women centre. So if it's too much for them to come and sit in the court environment then we'll do it online. It's much better seeing them face-to-face, right, it's much better, but until we can offer a position whereby they've got their own entrance and we're in a court that's less formal." Magistrate 3

“We are restricted with the court rooms themselves, but when we can and you will see this in Bolton, we actually move to the centre in terms of we’re actually sitting at the same level as the woman. We’re not that very far apart but we’ll sit with the woman at the same level so we can talk to them and engage with them, they can see the colour of our eyes sort of thing, and it’s about maybe reducing some of the barriers like taking your lanyards off, lowering the laptops if we’re using them, so that we’re not creating any other barriers. Using first names, now that’s not something we do in adult court.” **Magistrate 1**

Magistrates reflected on potential adaptations aimed at reducing the formalities typically associated with traditional courtroom settings. Additionally, they explored the use of online review hearings as a means to facilitate women's engagement in more accessible and supportive environments, such as Women's Centres, with the assistance of Probation staff.

“But in an ideal world to be honest, I think that they could have a cup of tea, just be a bit even more informal, a cup of tea and a biscuit and that makes that completely different, doesn’t it, it makes it completely different?”

So yeah, to just come in and just say ‘would you like a tea or ...’ it alters it straightaway ... doesn’t that alter it straightaway...Would you like a tea or a coffee?” **Magistrate 2**

“Obviously in the women centres, now since Covid and now that we see them often online, so they feel safe within that environment. Coming into court is quite a big deal for a lot of them and we immediately try to put them at ease and get them water or ... it is safety...But within the courtroom setting, with words, with comfort, we want them to feel at ease, we want them to know immediately this is a courtroom, but it’s an informal courtroom, because we want them to talk freely. So it’s all about that, it’s all about our first few lines are all about ...that’s why I like to see them again if we can, at least have one member of the bench the next time they come in and see us within the eight weeks say, it just relaxes them. It can be quite scary for anyone, even if you’re not an offender it’s quite an austere place.” **Magistrate 4**

Magistrates discussed the austere environment of courts and how these are experienced by women. It is evident that there is some awareness of the challenges that women face within the environment. It is clear that the Magistrates feel the environment is much more informal than their traditional adult court spaces, however the women's experiences do not align with this view.

6.6 Probation staffs' Perspectives of the Environment

Probation staff who work on the PSC reviews also recognised the importance of holding the reviews online for women. This was aligned with their understanding of women's previous experiences of court and the fear associated.

"I think the area that we struggle with is – as you've seen when you've come into court – we struggle with the court room and other places have set rooms that they use which isn't a court room, it's like a round table, they all sit down and it's very informal. Whereas here it's very formal. There's a court, there's a dock and we try and use the screen to cover the dock, but everyone knows it's still there. And I think that's where we struggle with the resources, is getting a decent room, because the environment of it can change somebody's experience massively. It can go from a terrifying experience to ... 'I came really nervous 'cos I've got to go into court', but then you get there and you're like 'This isn't anything like I thought it would be. There's not any sign that I could be going back to prison' for example and things like that. So I think the environment makes a massive difference and that's one thing that we do struggle with. But I know we are pushing constantly to try and get a room changed so hopefully that change is soon." **Probation staff Member 3**

So the women who I've got who do the problem-solving courts attend them virtually ... so the women's centre where we have all of our probation appointments and things like that, they will have a probation appointment and then afterwards or beforehand do the problem-solving court review virtually, so I've not been present when they've done them in person but doing them virtually... I think It works best – and I've not seen them do it in person but – I really like the aspect of it being virtual, so that the women can still be at the women centre which is where they feel safe, where they feel more comfortable – 'cos it's quite an intimidating thought for women to go and present at court...cos normally they have the first and the last one done in person - I've seen women as soon as I've said that to them had a big meltdown and said 'I cannot go back to court, I do not want to stand up and do that'. I said Okay, that's fine; I've spoke to the problem-solving court, and they've agreed they can do it virtually."

Probation staff Member 1

Probation staff discussed the court as being a re-traumatising environment based on the previous experiences of women accessing those spaces. Staff shared concerns relating to women's attendance in court based on these factors, but recognised the importance of supporting women with online provisions.

"I was a little bit shocked about the environment that the court was, it felt very, very court-like. It was potentially only that day but it had a low attendance and I felt that it was ... if I was a woman who'd committed an offence, I'd feel a lot of trauma about entering a court building anyway and in the last two years that I've done that I know that is a fact of getting them women through the door." **Probation staff Member 4**

"Yeah. In a way it can be a trigger for them, can't it, 'cos if they have an entrenched pattern of offending and they've been constantly coming back to court, it can trigger some negative feelings for them and perhaps some trauma. Even coming in they have to go through security before they get here 'cos it's in an official building obviously they do the security, but that in itself is quite a lot, whereas if they were at say a women centre or a meeting room, you perhaps wouldn't have that much of that going on, would you?" **Probation staff Member 6**

Over half of the Probation staff who took part in this research were keen to move the PSCs out of the court spaces and into an alternative neutral location within the community.

"I think I'd probably like to see it all take place in a community space. I think we'd get rid of the barrier of re-traumatization, the kind of feeling I'm still in a court room. Yeah, we're talking about wishes here. I would just like it to be mutual territory." **Probation staff Member 3**

It is clear that there is a collective recognition of the austere spaces within courts and the impact this can have on women's senses of safety and comfort. Whilst Magistrates recognised the challenges associated with the environment, they were keen to focus on ways to create informality and comfort within the court space. Alternatively, both Women and Probation staff expressed a shared motivation to relocate PSC reviews to more neutral, community-based settings. Since the research was conducted, some efforts have been made to improve the court space at Manchester Magistrates' Court. However, this does not detract from the broader finding that court buildings remain stigmatising and unwelcoming environments for women, and that PSC reviews would be better held in more neutral, supportive settings.

7. The Review Reports in Problem-Solving Courts

This section acknowledges the role of the reports produced by Probation staff which discuss women's progression within the reviews and their community or court orders. These reports are shared with women prior to the review and Magistrates are required to read the report prior to women accessing the court space. Additionally, they are an opportunity for probation officers to share women's achievements during their engagement on PSC and associated rehabilitative activities.

The reports can provide Magistrates with some understanding of the lives and experiences of women who are engaging with PSCs.

"It just felt good 'cos they've obviously read the reports and they've seen like your background and certain circumstances that I've been in in my past and this-that-and-the-other, so obviously they'll read that and they'll listen, they're probably thinking poor girl, how the fuck is she still here." Kelly

In order for the reviews to run smoothly, Magistrates rely on the detail and clarity provided by Probation staff within the report, to support their discussions with women.

"When they're at their best, and it has improved, the reports that we get and the feedback from probation is good. We used to often get maybe ... it didn't feel that the report had been written wholeheartedly, sometimes as though they were in a rush. But now that's much better. So for it to all run smoothly, that they've obviously turned up, they've had time to read the report, the women that they agree with it, that we've got all the information. There are issues because sometimes they will put in ... its constantly changing, they give different abbreviations for things and different, what do you call them, different projects that are available that we don't know about it...."

Magistrate 4

Similarly, Probation staff shared experiences of Magistrates commenting on the depth of information in the report. Probation staff appeared reflective and happy to receive feedback from Magistrates about this with the PSCs.

“There’s been times when the magistrates have passed down messages to us, perhaps our reports have been too long or that you raised something a few months ago that quite often the reports were the same as the time before but just a few edits made. I think they ask that they could be rewritten rather than just copied and pasted. So it’s quite positive that they can feed that information back to us.” **Probation staff Member 2**

Probation staff did acknowledge the importance of not rushing the reports, however there are resourcing pressures associated with creating a detailed, reflective and tailored report for the reviews.

“I don’t think any of the workload measuring tools that we have take into account the extra time it takes to write these reports as well. I guess it’s helpful if you’ve got one previously and you can make amends to it, but especially if it’s a report that ... because not a lot of any of the things that we write down the women ever get to see or read, so I’m always mindful that a) it’s going to courts but also something that’s being able to take away with them, so it’s not something you want to rush or write things for the sake of it, but it’s something that I spend a lot of time thinking about what to say, especially if you’re kind of reflecting the progress and the praise aspect of it. And even then how you word some of the perhaps negative elements, I think you have to be quite mindful of that. So yeah, quite complicated, which I don’t think is reflected and is fully appreciated in terms of resource management or just general management either.” **Probation staff Member 4**

“I feel it’s quite a person-centred approach, women’s problem-solving court, ‘cos every female is completely different. Every report that gets put in is completely different because it’s gotta be tailor-made to that individual, what’s going on in their life, what things are we doing for them to support them. And I think the women feel that, well I know the women feel that because we get such good feedback from it and it’s nice to see.” **Probation staff Member 5**

The resourcing implications for Probation staff are an important consideration within the person centred report writing associated with the PSCs. Similarly, Magistrates also spoke about the importance of having enough time to read and digest the report, prior to women accessing the courts.

“When they’re at their very best everybody knows what’s going on, the paperwork is in order, we have time to review the previous reports, probation are absolutely on the ball and are aware of everything that they can offer to support our women. The legal

adviser is tuned in to the whole thing as well, so it's really a case of it has to be really good team-working I would say, that makes the best court." **Magistrate 5**

"The main collaboration is obviously with probation because we rely on their initial report for the hearing and we will ask probation at the beginning if there's anything – actually before the woman comes in I think it's important to ask probation if there's anything not in the report that we need to be aware of. Because there might have been something that's happened since the report was prepared or there might be something and sometimes that can relate to abusive relationships that probation might not want to go into detail in the report but we need to be aware of when we're speaking to the woman, so I think that collaboration between all the parties in court is really important. I mean obviously there's collaboration with the woman as well from the point of view that we're looking at her situation and her future, taking account of her past, so it is a very collaborative process; a lot more so than the criminal court." **Magistrate 6**

Magistrates spoke about the importance of collaborative partnership working and good standards of information sharing within the written reports, which can support them to better understand women's circumstances and needs. Probation staff did share some concerns relating to Magistrates not having enough time to read and comprehend the more sensitive information within reports.

"I have had more difficult experiences working with the magistrates. I've had experiences where I've had a woman whose children were removed and that was in the report and then they asked her how she was getting on with the kids at home and then it was very upsetting to then have to hear her say 'Oh actually my kids were taken away' or 'they're living with my mum at the minute' and that's just an example of them perhaps not reading the report or perhaps misunderstanding what had been put in there. So that was difficult." **Probation staff Member 1**

This is particularly significant if the courts wish to reduce the likelihood of re-traumatisation for women during this process. The reports contain a variety of information relevant to women's lives, experiences and challenges they are currently facing. Women felt that the reports can focus too much on their past behaviour including their conviction and offence.

"Well, the first review when they give me the report kept bringing it up what I'd done wrong and that and it does on every report I have. But it feels like I don't want that wrote down 'cos it spoils the rest of it then, do you get me?...It stands out like a sore

thumb 'cos everything's good in the report and then I get that, it's hard. So the first thing you're gonna read is me sentence, what I've done wrong. I know I've done wrong, this is why I'm on a review now, do you get me?" Rachel

Similarly Probation staff also shared the same concerns relating to women repeatedly reading their offence information and past focussed report writing.

"I think one of the mistakes that we make is we put the offence ... I don't know if you've looked at the reports and I think it's a mistake, I think the magistrates should be given a separate 'This is what they've done' and then the report itself should be focussed on the woman, what she's been doing with probation, not what she did to get that order. I think it's absolutely unnecessary and it can trigger a woman like you wouldn't believe and I know I've slipped into something else, but it just reminded me of what I don't like about woman problem-solving court and that's one of the things that I don't like. In fact the way I manage that is I go out and say 'Don't read that first paragraph because you already know what you did and you already know it was wrong, focus on the second paragraph' – or the second part of the report." Probation staff Member 4

An important part of the report process is to ensure that women have had the chance to see or hear the information which has been presented to Magistrates for the review. Magistrates were also keen to know from women if they feel that the report is a good reflection of their progress and needs.

"To make sure that they've read the report and they're happy with it. So I think as the magistrates it is our role to establish that atmosphere where the woman does feel she can be honest and open and she can trust that it is going to be confidential and trust that we will listen to what she says without judging. So I think it's very much up to us to establish the tenor of the conversation and to show that level of interest and concern at the outset." Magistrate 6

"But I think to come down to their level to make sure that it simplified what we're saying to them and that they can understand it, not to assume that they can read the report, they might not be able to read them. We need to make sure they've read it but to choose our wording right, 'have you had a chance to hear or read the report' not just 'have you read the report' because that would then get their heart going 'I can't read'...We say 'did you read the report, did you hear the report. Amazing'. And that makes them feel better so if it was like 'Oh, we've got this'. No. It's about being able to start with a positive, so we try to make it achievable." Magistrate 4

Magistrates also recognised the importance of accessibility of information and how the reports are presented to women to support inclusivity. The positive reflections of women's engagement with the PSCs and their goals are also a key component within the reports. In addition, the quality of the relationship between women and their probation officer was acknowledged as being an integral aspect within the report writing.

"It's like I've always been posted from pillar to post anyway growing up and it's like but I'm more determined to do it because of this Problem Solving thing 'cos they always notice. When (probation officer) puts my reports in like she's noticing the good bits I'm doing. Obviously, she did have to tell when she thought I had a drink, but I hadn't. I'd tell her, why would I need lie? If I wanted a drink of lager, I'd have a beer it won't stop me...Yeah, 'cos I see that they're noticing, when (probation officer) puts that report I see they're noticing all the good things I'm doing and where I don't really notice a lot of it myself, it's only when they like point it out like. They were saying how far I've come and that and all my appointments I've done and everything else, the Courses I'm going on it's like I didn't realise until they pointed it out." **Joanne**

Women were conscious of the way in which their probation officers would advocate for them during the report writing, to reduce women's concerns and to enhance the experience of women within the reviews.

"They're gonna put a report in, you have a good rapport with your Probation Officer, they'll go like, "let's sugar coat it", aren't they...for the Magistrates so they're sugar coating your report for you, aren't they? That's what they're doing, they're sugar coating your behaviour and stuff like that so they can see it goes a bit good for you but not in a way where you're getting away with it...just like, just calming it down a bit, do you know what I mean?." **Karen**

Similarly, Probation staff discussed the importance of empowering women by being forward looking within the reports.

"Even like on my reports I'll always write if I'm proud of them, if they've done something ... it doesn't mean it has to relate to their order, if they've achieved something in their personal life I'll write about it 'cos we need to empower these sort of things and say 'Wow, well done'...but a big part of my report when I write them I'm all about building these women up not knocking them down and there is occasions where I've had to breach somebody who've not turned up for their appointments and

I have to put that in, I can't not put that in, so I would write it but then I would always counteract that with a positive, even if the report was very negative – 'cos that's all I had to write, very negative - I would turn it around at the end and say 'However I am confident that if we get this remediation back on track we can move forward from this. You know so the female's not thinking 'Oh my...' 'cos they get to read the report, I don't want them thinking 'Oh look at all this she's wrote' even though it's true and they will acknowledge that it's true 'cos they haven't been engaging or turning up to their appointments, but subconsciously they'll be thinking when they're reading it 'Oh actually, she's got a point, yeah. If I do go back to me appointments we can turn it around' you know rather than it being a completely negative report." **Probation staff Member 5**

Even if the report is focussing on a hurdle experienced by women, the staff are conscious of acknowledging positives within the reports, to support women to have a well rounded discussion with Magistrates during the review. Reading and hearing positive recognition from their probation officer within the reports was really valued by women.

"They don't have to go that extra mile and every time they have done it they have gone that extra mile, even my probation officer she's been like 'Oh you're doing really well' and things like that. She could have just gone and let them read me report and that's it. See you later. They didn't have to do that." **Gemma**

Probation staff also shared the value associated with report writing, as it provides a regular opportunity to reflect on the positive achievements of women during the PSC reviews.

"Yeah, I really enjoy seeing the gradual progress of the women, 'cos I think sometimes you can have a 12-month order and then it's slipped through your fingers without even knowing, so I think even the active writing the reports every two-three months is quite powerful and reflecting and think oh gosh, look how much we've achieved in these three months." **Probation staff Member 3**

Having the regular opportunity to receive recognition from their probation officers and positive reinforcement from Magistrates within the PSC review, is something that some women look forward to.

"I can't wait till Monday me, for me to listen to my reports again because you have to have reports done don't you for Judges and stuff like that and I got a fabulous report

thanks to (probation officer) and everybody who is working with me. The Judge said to me when I stood up in Crown Court, I've never had a probation officer put fantastic on a probation report." **Lucy**

This demonstrates the importance of the relational and strength-based approach within the PSC review discussions and reports.

8. Reviews in Practice

It is important to recognise that PSC reviews take place within a wider criminal justice context, where women interact with courts and professionals in settings shaped by formal rules and informal traditions. As evidenced above, these spaces often carry inherent power dynamics that can influence how women experience and engage with the process. Acknowledging these dynamics is key to assessing whether reviews can be delivered in a way that empowers women, promotes trust, and supports meaningful participation. The following section explores how PSCs are experienced in practice, including the informal interactions that shape them, examples of relational and gender-informed communication, as well as challenges around role clarity, therapeutic boundaries, and how women express agency, make requests, and are perceived and responded to by Magistrates. PSC hearings represent a unique space that have the potential to offer opportunities for engagement and support, whilst also carrying inherent complexities and challenges that need to be navigated with care.

8.1 Before the Review: The Role of Pre Rituals

While often informal and easily overlooked, pre-rituals, brief discussions held in open court before a woman enters the hearing, either in person or via CVP, played an important role in shaping the tone and focus of PSC reviews. These moments served as a kind of ‘scene-setting’, helping to structure proceedings and prepare Magistrates for the review ahead.

Pre-rituals typically fall into two categories: process-driven and context-driven. In process-driven interactions, Magistrates, Probation staff and the Legal Advisor used the time to clarify practical matters, such as confirming attendance, addressing possible breaches, and identifying key points in the report that may require further questioning, such as discrepancies in dates or missed appointments. Magistrates often agreed on who would lead the conversation during the review, ensuring a coordinated approach.

In contrast, context-driven pre-rituals were shaped more by the circumstances surrounding individual women and their needs. These conversations sometimes reflected positive practices, with Magistrates and Probation staff using the time to consider how best to support a woman’s engagement, for example, by recognising barriers like financial hardship or emotional strain that could impact attendance. Magistrates that were interviewed gave examples of how this time could be used to recognise links to women’s safety. For example, **Magistrate 1** explained:

“We can't dictate this 'cos it's a public court, but we tend to ... sometimes people say 'Oh, can my partner' or whatever 'come in and sit in'. We can't say no but we would need to be sure that this person wasn't the perpetrator and things like that. So it's about thinking about the safety of the women when that kind of request is made.”

However, observations also highlighted variability in approach. Some discussions revealed misunderstandings or assumptions about women's past offences (evidenced above) and also present behaviours, especially around issues like mental health, emotional distress, and poverty. In these instances, pre-rituals included cynical or stereotyped views that did not align with the gender-responsive, trauma-informed aims of the PSC model. Additionally, some of these views, especially around attendance and the demanding nature of PSCs, did not take into account the complex challenges women were facing in their daily lives and communities. For example, **Nicola** stated:

“To me it's an inconvenience because I live quite far from where I go, so it's quite far to get there especially as I've got mental health and I've got COPD and stuff, so I struggle to get about and stuff to be honest...It takes 40 minutes on a tram to get to town, then I have to walk and try and find it and I struggle to walk and there's not a tram that goes right by it so I have to walk. It's just like...I struggle with it to be honest.”

Whilst Probation staff did attempt to challenge these conversations and offer more nuanced perspectives, Magistrates ultimately held the authority in the courtroom. In one example, a 19-year-old woman attending her first review brought a close family member for emotional support. The Magistrates, however, refused to allow the supporter into the room, deeming her attire inappropriate, highlighting the discretionary power Magistrates hold and the potential impact of their decisions on women's engagement and comfort.

Overall, pre-rituals were a meaningful but under-recognised part of PSC practice. When used thoughtfully, they supported coordination and more tailored engagement. However, their influence on tone and perceptions underscores the importance of reflective and informed practice from all involved.

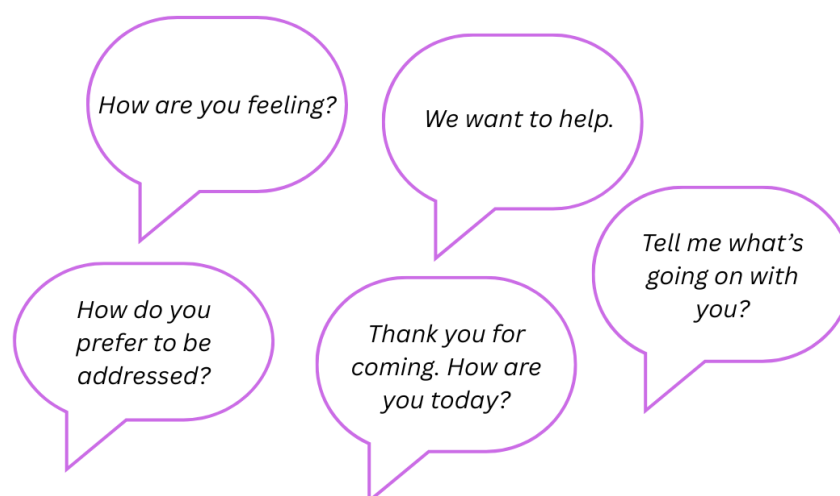
8.2 Relational Talk and Good Practice

While pre-rituals shaped the tone and expectations before women entered the space, it was the quality of relational talk during the reviews themselves that most visibly influenced women's experience of the process. Relational communication is said to be at the heart of what makes PSCs distinctive. Good practice could be seen in many reviews. However, there are challenges in consistently delivering relationally driven, trauma-informed engagement across all hearings and its effectiveness often depends on individual styles, institutional constraints, and the cultural limitations of the court.

Most reviews started with standard court formalities, such as asking women to state their names and dates of birth. However, in some cases, particularly when there was an established rapport, Magistrates opened with more informal, friendly interactions. These included simple, human-centred questions, e.g., asking how a pet was doing, helping to create a more comfortable atmosphere. During first reviews, Magistrates typically explained the purpose of the review process, the overall goals of the PSC, and how goal setting would work. From there, relational talk played a key role. This involved using open-ended, engaging questions to help women feel more at ease and give them space to share their views and experiences in their own words.

Some examples include:

Figure 12: Relational and Rapport Building Examples



The Magistrates we interviewed expressed strong commitment to the PSC approach, viewing it as a meaningful way to support positive change in women's lives. They recognised the importance of making women feel at ease during the reviews, believing that even small, positive interactions could have a significant impact. For example, **Magistrate 2** reflected:

“At least we can try and give the women the confidence and empower them to take it on more rather than just say ‘I’m giving up with all this’. It’s giving them some mental strength to give them confidence as well, to see that ... yeah, we can only do what we can, can’t we, but if a woman goes away feeling happier, having had positive strokes, she’s been listened to, people believe in her, then that will give her a strength I think, whereas without ... I mean it’s very sad when women don’t turn up and that’s frustrating. And you can think - being here all day – and I’ve seen four out of sixteen or whatever, but the fact is we have to think well we’ve seen the four.”

When women reflected on the positive aspects of the PSC reviews, they often highlighted moments of praise, encouraging gestures, supportive conversation, and validation. These interactions, however small, did help convey, to some women, that they were seen, heard, and valued:

“Every time the panel’s always been really supportive and full of praise, which sometimes I know you’ve put yourself in these situations, but it’s good to hear from someone that you’re actually doing good. Just a bit of validation really.” **Gemma**

“The second Magistrate, basically I told her about how I write notes and put them under my pillow at night and then fold them away in the morning so then I could just sleep on it, and she gave me a little bear thing with a zip on it... I was like – what?? I was literally like, what?? You’re supposed to be like, punishing me and instead you’re like helping me with what I can do, like when I’m worried about something, it’s crazy.”

Grace

“I’ve walked out of here pardoning myself and going “ey, the Courts were buzzing with me”, do you know what I mean like, it’s well nice so that gives you a bit of a boost to carry on.” **Karen**

While most women described praise and validation during PSC reviews as meaningful and encouraging, it’s important to recognise that the court setting always carried an inherent power

dynamic. For many women, this created an ongoing tension that sat alongside the positive aspects of their experience:

"It is positive because what I was just saying then...because it gives you a different...it gives you 'er...what's the word...a mixture of feelings like, so obviously, when you are doing that it's like scary wary feeling like, what, you're up against the Court again aren't you, do you know what I mean?" **Karen**

Women often felt anxious about what the PSC reviews might lead to, with many fearing that a breach would result in a prison sentence. For example:

"I've not slept all night thinking about coming here as well. I wouldn't have missed it, I knew full well I'd breach and I'd end up going to prison, so I haven't slept for worrying." **Gemma**

While many women found praise and validation from Magistrates encouraging, some also described it as patronising. For those already engaging with Probation and receiving support from Women's Centres, the purpose of PSC reviews often felt unclear or unnecessary, adding extra pressure without offering additional value:

"Really nice yeah, yeah, you know, they say we are very proud of you, well done, which.... Thanks (laughing) yeah, I don't really see the point in having that conversation, with people that don't even know who I am, saying I am so proud of you, well done. I mean, I am 47 not 21, it's a bit patronising and a bit, well I was already doing it anyway. You know, don't, I just don't think there is much I have got out of it."

Natalie

"I do write everything down but every time you go it's still very different. It's just going ... it's just like a pointless exercise. I know obviously it's meant to ... but I've done well, we have to do these things, I understand that. But there's no goals to the end of it if you will, it's like an extra probation meeting with magistrates for some reason. To me I just don't see the benefit." **Christina**

Although women understood the importance of engaging with PSC reviews, many felt they added little value to their journey. For those already engaging with Probation and Women’s Centres, the reviews could feel repetitive, burdensome, and disconnected from the progress they were making elsewhere. These insights underline the importance of involving women in shaping the process so it feels relevant and supportive, not just another requirement. At the same time, they raise important questions about who PSCs are ultimately serving and how the model can be adapted to better meet the needs and priorities of women themselves.

8.3 Blurred Roles and Judicial Inconsistency

The PSC model can allow for more relational, human-centred engagement between women and the court. Women who had positive experiences recognised this and described how they felt interactions could foster empathy and connection. However, it is crucial to recognise this also created ambiguity around the appropriate boundaries and responsibilities of different roles. In some reviews, Magistrates took on roles that extended beyond their judicial remit, offering advice, guidance, or adopting a ‘life coach’ tone. While often well-intentioned and rooted in a desire to support, this at times veered into territory traditionally held by Probation practitioners or Women’s Centres. As a response to help women manage day-to-day stresses this guidance was welcomed. However, in some cases this role drift placed the burden of change on the woman in ways that overlooked the structural and systemic challenges they were navigating. For example, in one review a woman was advised to go walking and “*stare at a tree, it might set off some hormones*”, as a response to dealing with depression and being on an NHS waiting list. In another review, a woman was advised to “*set a purpose for the day*” when she described how she was coping with the loss of a child.

At times, these blurred roles appeared to stem from a broader issue of social distance, where Magistrates, despite their intentions and efforts, were too far removed from the day-to-day realities of the women’s lives to fully grasp the complexity of their experiences. This gap occasionally resulted in well-meaning but misplaced advice or assumptions that did not align with women’s needs. In several reviews, Magistrates offered well-meaning advice on topics like food, health, and lifestyle, such as asking whether women exercised or suggesting it as a personal goal. While this guidance was often intended to be supportive, and some women responded positively, the impact of such conversations varied. For example, **Magistrate 4** explained:

“I had recommended to one of the women to do a gratitude journal and to write to her to see how well she was doing, ‘cos she blipped week by week, was feeling bad

and was going through ... and some weeks she was amazing and I said 'I want you to write it down and then you'll be able to see how you're doing'. Anyway, amongst other things I got a message back, I hadn't seen her that particular week, but she'd sort of said 'Can you tell that Ma'am', 'she's changed my life and I'm making the difference that she told me and it's really helpful'."

and **Nicola** recalled:

"The people on the panel like are quite nice but like I say I've had issues with Problem-Solving Courts to be completely honest with you... there's a woman there and she constantly picks at my weight, like she was like erm aw you should... like I was like "Aw I'm doing so well", I was so happy... and I went in there so happy and I come out of there wanting to hurt myself, I came out of there really depressed. Honestly, I wanted to self-harm, I felt that low how I'd just been treated in there and she was like erm... I said, "oh I went on a date with my boyfriend", she was like maybe you should go on walking for a date instead of going out for food so and she proper did. She was like, aw you should go out, you need to get out and make one of your goals exercise. It wasn't even something that I really wanted as a goal cos do you know what I mean, I've got breathing issues. I can't when I exercise, I'll literally have an asthma attack I struggle, do you know what I mean? It's something I struggle with my weight and she was like you should pick up tins from your kitchen and stuff like that, she was proper pushing it on me as if to like... as if she was trying to say something. I felt really, really uncomfortable, I felt absolutely awful."

Alongside this, some Magistrates demonstrated uncertainty about how to respond to women's complex circumstances, especially when this involved trauma, emotional distress, or irregular engagement. These uncertainties sometimes resulted in inconsistent or overly directive approaches, which could affect how women experienced the reviews and their own role within them. In some reviews, Magistrates asked direct questions about women's trauma, including "Can you tell us about your trauma?", "Can you tell us what you went through?", "Do you know why you haven't had therapy?". **Kim** explained:

"I mentioned that I was in the care system to two of them on one of the times and it was a bit like ... one of the questions that the magistrate asked was 'Do you think that your childhood impacted the way you are today?' and I was like 'hmm, that's a bit mad, like why do you wanna ask me that question. And I wouldn't really like to answer

that. And then she went 'Right, okay'. I was like 'right okay? You should understand that, I don't wanna answer a question if I don't need to', do you know what I mean? But yeah. That's probably one of the only times that something that deep's come of it... I was like 'Well that's a bit deep'. Dehumanising like. That's just making me feel like, am I trying to put the blame on my childhood experiences, do you know what I mean?"

Probation staff described the complexities and variations:

"Quite out of touch with perhaps with the complexities of people's lives, where they'll say things like ... I had a woman who had just come out of an abusive relationship and one of the goals they'd set was 'Well you'll go and do the domestic abuse course, won't you, now'. And she just nodded along. Yes, I was actually thinking there's still quite a lot of teething problems to kind of get out so perhaps I find their ... they might have a slightly over-simplistic view of what it is like." **Probation staff Member 1**

"I think there's a few magistrates which are so good at doing the problem-solving court and we really are proud to have them on our bench, on our panels, because they're so good at it and they know exactly what they're doing. And a lot of the time you get some not very well-informed magistrates and then you get some very humble magistrates." **Probation staff Member 2**

Equally, some Magistrates recognised and spoke openly about this difficult boundary:

"I find this quite tricky because we're not social workers, we don't know all the facts and there is a big part of you that wants to say ... and I can remember one woman saying 'Oh he's already contacted me asking me to get drugs in for him' and there's a part of you that wants to scream 'Don't do it. Don't have anything more to do with him', but that's not our role. We can't say that, so I think we have to be very careful how we provide that support to encourage them to be safe. So I think we have to say things like, is that person a good person for you to be associating with? Is that a positive relationship for you?" **Magistrate 6**

This section highlights how overlapping roles, varied judicial approaches, and the social distance between Magistrates and the women they support can shape PSC interactions. While these dynamics can create challenges, we also observed examples of sensitive, person-centred practice that had a meaningful impact. These findings underscore the importance of ongoing reflective practice and clear

role boundaries to help embed and strengthen good practice, ensuring that support remains consistent, compassionate, and empowering for the women involved.

8.4 Women's Voice and Agency

This section highlights the ways in which women could actively engage in the PSC reviews, voicing their needs, setting goals, and expressing views about the review process. Their contributions reflect resilience, self-awareness, and a desire for meaningful support. By listening closely to women, these findings ensure PSCs can build on what's working and ensure they evolve as supportive spaces that recognise and respond to the realities of women's lives.

Women's reflections on the goals set during PSC reviews revealed the need for goals to be realistic and rooted in women's real-life contexts, the value of autonomy and choice in goal setting, and concerns when goals felt disconnected from the issues linked to their court orders. Most women stressed the importance of understanding their personal circumstances when setting goals, recognising that without this insight, goals could become unrealistic or feel disconnected from their realities. As **Lucy** reflected:

"Understanding what everyone is going through in their own personal life as well because if you don't know what's going on in someone's personal life and you're setting them goals and they can't succeed them goals then you obviously can tell and input, that there's obviously something going on if they're not setting, if they're not completing the goals."

Women also spoke about being able to set their own meaningful goals, particularly where they related directly to issues they cared about and needed to resolve, though these often overlapped with issues that were beyond the control of women. For example, **Karen** described how her goal was shaped by urgent personal responsibility:

"My goal now is I've been up there yesterday, I've phoned loads of care homes myself because I'm sick to death of the social workers dragging their feet. He's getting very bad now, he's escaping from hospital, he's breaking his arms, he's doing this, so my goal at the moment, is to focus on getting my dad a permanent position in a care home."

For others, goals focused on maintaining stability through attendance, work, and accessing support:

“The goals are to keep up appointments and I need to get counselling, bereavement counselling. And obviously to keep up with employment, that’s what they said as well.” **Kelly**

However, not all women felt the goals were always relevant. Some questioned the connection between the goals they were asked to achieve and their actual court order. For example, **Nicola** reflected:

“What’s health got to do with my order? Your goals are likely to be with your order, your goals are meant to be something you can have support with your order to do, do you know what I mean?”

Goals also had the potential to impact level of trust or distrust in the process:

“I’d say the trust would be broke if there was any random goals that I thought was unnecessary.” **Gemma**

Crucially, women valued having agency in choosing their goals, emphasising the importance of goals feeling personal and purposeful rather than imposed:

“Yeah ‘cos it’s more like doing my own goals, like they’re not setting like random goals that I wouldn’t trust ... to be of any use to me or like that or any unnecessary ... I won’t say making you do something you don’t want to do. They need to give you the options to choose your goals. So it’s more or less based on me really.” **Gemma**

These insights suggest that when goal setting is collaborative, personalised, and respectful of women's lived realities, it is more meaningful and potentially effective. Conversely, goals that feel disconnected or imposed can undermine the purpose of the review process.

9. Support in Practice: Help and Where it Came From

This section explores the diverse challenges women face while involved in PSCs, including issues such as housing instability, health problems, parenting pressures, Social Care concerns, and financial hardship. While the PSC reviews played a role in offering consistent contact and acknowledgment of these difficulties, many women emphasised the crucial support they received from probation services and Women's Centres. These services were seen as providing the practical assistance, emotional support, and continuity that enabled women to address these challenges and make positive strides in their lives.

The evaluation findings show that probation services and Women's Centres were central to helping women navigate their complex circumstances. While PSCs provided a platform to discuss these needs and potentially connect women with support, it was the ongoing, day-to-day support from Probation practitioners and Women's Centre staff that had the most significant impact on women's ability to move forward. In this section, we outline the types of support women received, their perspectives on these services, and where they felt additional assistance was necessary to further aid their progress.

Women consistently cited Probation and Women's Centres (usually seen synonymous) as providing the most comprehensive and impactful support, particularly in areas of mental health, addiction, and housing. Many women noted that Probation officers offered practical, tangible help with personal issues, such as arranging counselling, mental health support, and referrals for housing assistance. The accessibility of such support, particularly compared to longer waits for services through other agencies, was frequently highlighted:

"Well basically the probation obviously will get me onto the counselling ... they provide counselling within probation, whether it's foundations or ... obviously she's going to get on it." **Kelly**

"The doctor ... right, [Probation Officer] got me through, got me this therapist thing for people with mental health and with the doctor it takes two years to get to see one, but with probation I got it in two months. See probation can rush a lot of things a lot faster than your doctor. I could be still waiting for the same therapist now if it weren't for probation, do you know what I mean, and they've rushed everything through."

Rachel

Similarly, Magistrates recognised the vital role that Probation practitioners and Women's Centres played in the process, often acknowledging them as the core source of support and strength within the PSC model:

"But as panel and they're coming into the court and the court's saying you're doing really well ... we don't do it in the court, we don't do any of the work, we just recognise the work that she's done. So it's the probation and the women centres that are doing all the hard work." **Magistrate 1**

"I've visited a women centre and I see what they offer, it's a safe place, they have a list of activities going and the timetable of these women centres. I want to go there myself. So many different things." **Magistrate 3**

Women described Probation officers as a source of reliable and trusted support who helped them address underlying challenges beyond their criminal justice requirements. For many, this represented a shift away from feeling failed by other systems:

"I need help, and you know yourself I've needed the help and I've needed the help for years, I don't think. Like mental health teams and everything, I think they just like...I feel like...apart from Probation and the Court and everything these have helped me the most. I think I've been let down by the social services. I feel like I've been let down by mental health teams, I feel like I've been let down by quite a lot of people in professional sides... to be honest, I'll tell you they let me down, do you know they're the biggest part of letting me down in my life and not, but with Probation and the Courts it's been different, they're asking you is "what professional help do you need... take what you need" and that's where the biggest part of the impact has come from."
Lucy

"Well my probation officer, I can trust her. I've got quite a good relationship with her that I've always confided in her over everything. I'm quite open with her. Very. Yeah she is very trustworthy. She's always kept everything private." **Gemma**

This highlights a central point in that women were often disappointed by other agencies, such as mental health services or Social Care, but found that Probation was more responsive, reliable, and focused on meeting their needs. Within this context, Women's Centres played a central role in the support system, providing a safe and supportive environment for women to discuss their personal issues and access to non-statutory services and support. The emphasis here was on the comfort and emotional security women felt, which made it easier for them to open up. Several women highlighted

that they felt safe and comforted by the Women's Centre staff, which allowed them to engage more fully in the process:

"Knowing that I'm safe here [Women's Centre], not that I wouldn't be safe there but I just feel comfortable being here and [Women's Centre employee] there and she's next to me but she just leaves me to it and I chat away and like I say she just comes up to my face and asks Are you okay?" **Becky**

Women's feelings of safety and trust were important in ensuring that they could be open and honest about their experiences and needs. The non-judgmental, holistic nature of the support from Women's Centres and Probation staff helped women focus on their well-being while navigating complex issues. Women expressed a strong preference for a strengths-based approach, where support was not simply about solving their immediate problems but also about helping them build the resources and skills they needed for the future. Probation was appreciated for its holistic support, where women were seen as individuals rather than just subjects of the justice system. The involvement of Probation in addressing personal issues like substance misuse, mental health, social isolation and exploitation was crucial for many women:

"I'd say the Probation staff have been brilliant especially ... again if you work with them in every sort of aspect, like [Probation Officer] will go this-this-this-and-this, I'll put you forward and then as long as I'm sort of taking that information, that help which she's provided it's fine but then she says if you don't work with me if I just bury my head in the sand then obviously there's nothing she can do. I think ... yeah, probation they will help you as much as you want and you're allowed." **Christina**

"I've had problems recently with a lot of different things, like obviously I'm still on my order for seventeen months and I've breached twice because I've been going through a rough patch and she is so understanding, she's like 'Listen, you need to start engaging more with us all, you need to start doing all this'. We have got a really, really good working relationship like I can tell her anything and I know she's trustworthy because I've told her things and she has got into the police for me, like a police officer that's looking into, me being currently exploited, so yeah it's made me really, really trust her." **Kim**

"I thought a probation officer was to deal with your criminal side, not to get involved in your personal side as well. So that's what I've enjoyed about it. I have disabilities,

I've only just been diagnosed with ADHD and just for [Probation Officer] to come into my life at a time where I've been down, depressed, smoking as much cannabis as I want to. Like, it's kind of put me up and kind of getting myself back out in the open, having a drink with friends, socializing with friends. Otherwise, I'd just sit in my flat smoking cannabis all day and getting out to court appearances is getting me out in the open. Coming to probation, coming to court on the criminal side, it just gets me back out in the open of...I'm enjoying it now." **Lucy**

Women acknowledged that Probation staff were key in providing ongoing support. However, they also noted that they would benefit from more consistent help with practical, day-to-day matters that affected their ability to fully engage with the system. Many women indicated that once their immediate issues were resolved, they needed continuous support to maintain positive change and avoid recurring issues:

"I think not having probation is gonna be harder than getting off the drink... Because sometimes you can only do so much on your own can't you and then it gets too stressed, I feel like it has with me and that's why I'm back on probation. I needed help." **Rachel**

While Probation provided vital short-term solutions, sustained and consistent support was needed for long-term success. Ongoing support from Probation and Women's Centres is crucial to enable some women to maintain progress and work towards stability. Although the PSC played an important role in supporting women through providing a structured review of progress, it was clear that support services primarily came from Probation and Women's Centres. The court itself did not provide the direct support that women often needed to address the complex challenges they faced. Many women felt that PSCs could provide an opportunity to check in with Magistrates, but the positive, meaningful support was coming from other services and relationships.

The PSCs helped create a forum for some women to articulate their needs and receive praise, but the actual support, particularly in areas like housing and mental health, was not provided by the court:

"They do support you, Probation probably, Probations support you a lot more than Problem-Solving Court because they've got like a lot of resources. They can help you with like Grants, they can help you with like drugs, they can help you with like going

to college do you know what I mean? They've got a quite good range of things they can refer you to and stuff so..." Nicola

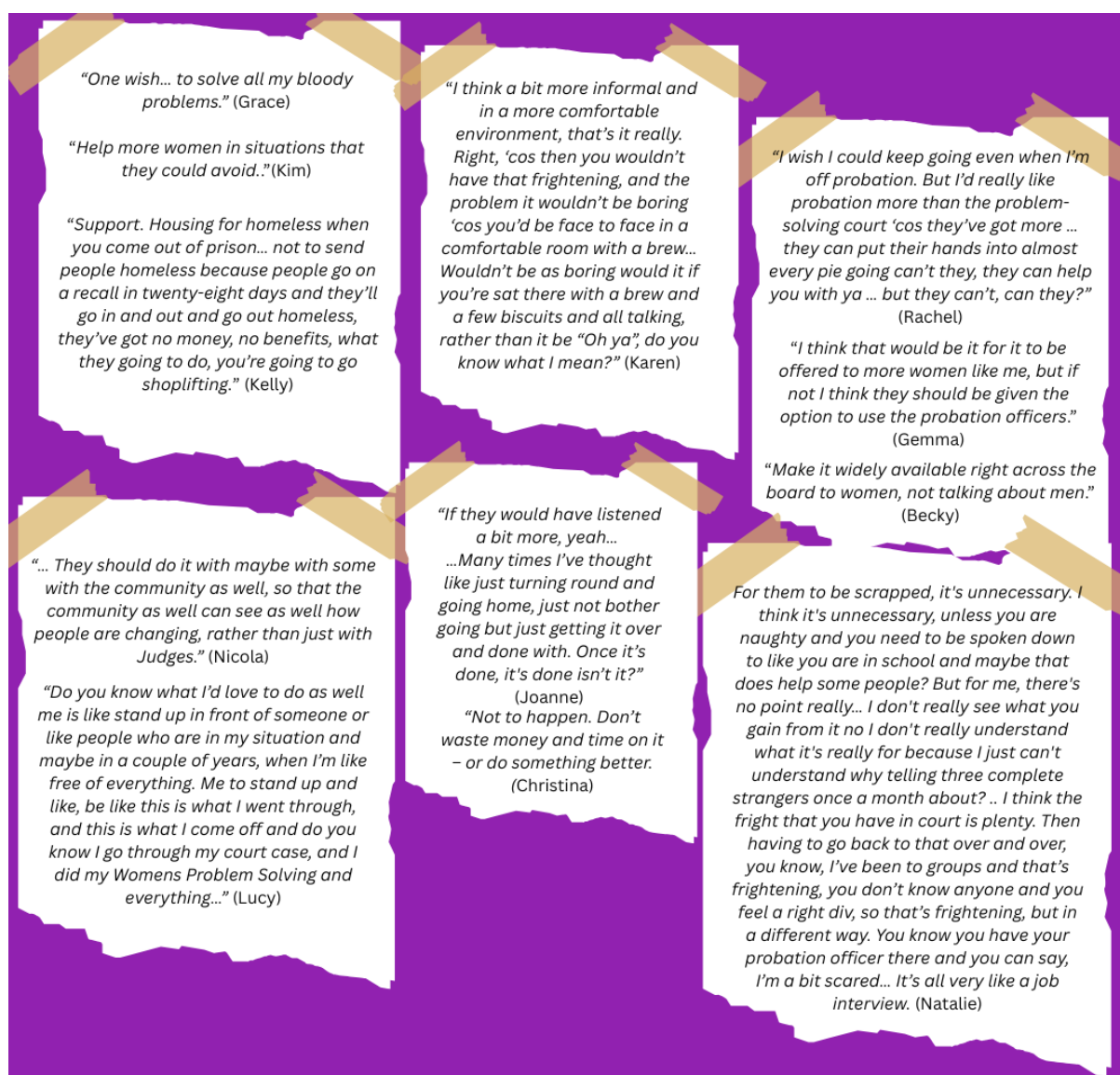
Overall, women's experiences highlight the vital role that Probation services and Women's Centres play in delivering the practical and emotional support needed to navigate complex lives and create lasting change. These trusted relationships, built on continuity and care, were often the cornerstone of women's progress. While the PSC reviews provided a consistent point of contact and a space for recognition, their direct role in delivering or facilitating support was more limited. This raises important questions for practitioners and policymakers about how PSCs can evolve to better complement existing support systems, ensuring they genuinely add value and progress to women's journeys rather than simply observing them.

10. What Women Want from Problem-Solving Courts

As part of the evaluation, women were invited to share *one wish* for how Problem-Solving Courts could better support them. These personal reflections offer powerful insight into what truly matters from the women's perspective. Their wishes speak clearly, women want a system that is holistic, compassionate, and accessible, one that communicates clearly, offers practical and emotional support, and feels safe, meaningful and human. They want to be seen, heard, and supported in ways that recognise their lives, not their offences.

What follows is a collection of their voices, a "wish wall" of ideas and hopes that highlight the changes women want to see.

Figure 13: Women's Wishes for PSCs



11. Recommendations

This evaluation highlights several areas for development within the Greater Manchester PSC model. Drawing on the experiences of Women, Probation staff and Magistrates, the following recommendations are designed to enhance the support offered, ensure the PSC process is inclusive and empowering, and aligned with gender-responsive and trauma-informed values.

Trauma Sensitive and Comfortable Environments

- To reduce re-traumatisation, PSC reviews should not be held in courts and should be moved to a neutral community space that can encourage open dialogue and greater safety and trust for women.
- Review Reports should remove offence focussed language to enable more constructive and developmental discussions.
- Staff and Judiciary should engage with regular reflective practice opportunities which are essential to share insights from reviews, to examine relational practice and to enhance equity within the process. This also provides an opportunity to discuss the emotional impact associated with trauma disclosures within reviews.
- Ongoing training on trauma-informed and gender-responsive approaches are needed to support safer and empathetic discussions where trauma is disclosed. This can also enhance more psychologically and emotionally safe conversations within the reviews.
- PSC reviews need to include the same people on panels to build rapport and to demonstrate consistency in the approach. Stability and familiarity can support women's engagement and trust within the dynamic.
- Appropriate resourcing should be prioritised in order to reflect the detail required in PSC review reports and the relational and ongoing support provided by Probation staff.

Ownership, Participation and Visibility

- Lived experience representation should be embedded throughout the design and operation of PSC models.
- Women with lived expertise should be employed to recruit and train staff and judiciary involved in PSCs, sit as members of PSC review panels, and provide support and peer mentorship to women engaged in the PSC process.

Clear Communication and Information

- Women accessing PSC reviews require clear and accessible information which is relevant to the process and expectations associated. This includes considering the timing of communication, to ensure that women have the opportunity to digest the information following their sentencing hearing.
- Superficial praise and repetitive conversations should be avoided in the reviews. This could enhance women's perception of the purpose and worth of the review discussions.

Accessible and Long-Term Support

- PSC panels should advocate for accessible, long-term support systems where possible. E.g., writing supporting letters to housing services. This could enhance women's perceptions of the purpose of the PSC reviews.
- PSC review panels should involve multi-agency partners to ensure comprehensive support. This should include representation from key third sector agencies and/or non-justice related statutory services.
- PSC models should ensure women receive support beyond the criminal legal system to sustain progress.

12. Conclusion

The Women's PSCs in Greater Manchester reflect a relational approach to gender responsive justice, designed to work flexibly and compassionately with the interconnected needs and experiences of women involved in the Criminal Justice System. The findings of this report reflect upon the worth of tailored and relational conversations which support women to navigate the complex systems and often disconnected support provisions to support trauma, health, addiction, social disadvantage and marginalisation. A core celebratory factor, outlined by Women, Probation staff and Magistrates, was the impact of strong multi-agency collaboration between the courts, Probation staff and Women's Centre teams.

Initial discussions with Women about their understanding of the PSCs in Greater Manchester, revealed that greater consideration was needed around the accessibility of relevant information and the appropriate timings of information sharing, to provide necessary transparency and greater opportunities for women to ask questions. Women shared varied reflections of their experiences engaging with PSCs, which included contrasting words such as 'intimidating', 'helpful', 'uplifting' and 'pointless'. This demonstrates the contrast in women's experiences which closely align with their sense of PSC purpose and relevance to their lives and needs.

The environmental review highlighted the challenges with the sensory experience and negative associations pertinent to the court space for women. However, the sensory discomfort and intimidating nature of the austere architecture, and formal security processes further impact upon women's senses of safety and experiences of stigma. The findings are encouraging, as they suggest a willingness from Women, Probation staff and Magistrates to consider ways to create more informal and relational opportunities within the spaces, to offer a critical opportunity for transformation. Addressing the spatial, experiential and sensory challenges within these spaces, could foster a more inclusive, equitable and relational justice process for Women.

The review reports associated with the reviews not only serve as informative tools, but they also shape the women's experience. When written with care, the reports provide opportunities for meaningful recognition and dialogue between Women and Magistrates. The findings demonstrate the value of strength-based, forward-looking report writing, which also recognises Women's progress without minimising or diminishing their experiences.

The experience of reviews in practice, highlights a number of positive aspects including relational communication and personalised goal setting. They play a role in creating supportive dialogue which foster agency and empowerment for women. However, the evidence also highlights significant variability in practice, which includes blurred role boundaries, and moments where institutional power and social distance undermine the PSCs supportive intent. Experiences of patronisation, inconsistency, and the imposition of goals disconnected from Women's lived realities suggest that without continuous reflection, clear role clarity, and co-designed processes, the model risks replicating some of the negative dynamics associated within the wider Criminal Justice System.

Women tended to conflate Magistrates and Judges due to their institutional roles, their authority and power. This perception was shaped less by specific legal knowledge and distinctions, but with power dynamics, hierarchical institutional structures and the delivery of justice. This means that despite Magistrates being lay volunteers, this was not relevant within the dynamic. This highlights the broader challenges of involving the Judiciary within post sentencing processes.

To summarise, while PSCs can provide spaces where women's achievements throughout Community Orders can be recognised and praised, it is clear that the most meaningful support comes from the trusting relationships created with their probation officers and staff based in Women's Centres. The support is consistent, compassionate and practical to support women to navigate issues relevant to their health, housing instability, addiction and trauma. Women shared that these felt like lifelines and places where they felt safe, respected and supported. Contrastingly, PSCs often function as forums of observation and encouragement, rather than active and practical places where women could seek support and navigation. There is a need to reassess the role of PSCs to re-imagine them as person-centred approaches offered by Probation and Women's Centres. Women wished for clearer communication, greater compassion and a more holistic approach to supporting their needs. A more gender and trauma responsive approach can evolve by listening to women, learning from their experiences in order to ensure the PSC's can be a greater relational and meaningful tool to support and engage with women.

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