

Lived experience voices: building better relationships

Nadia, Lived Experience member
Revolving Doors

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I am really pleased to have been invited to write the first essay of what we hope will be a regular lived experience feature in *Probation Quarterly*. My name is Nadia and I have been a lived experience member with Revolving Doors for more than 2 years. Revolving Doors is a criminal justice charity that seeks to address the cycle of crisis and crime through centring our lived experience voice across its work. In this essay I share my suggestions for how we, practitioners and people with lived experience, can work together to build the positive relationships needed to tackle the cycle of crisis and crime.

1. Building trust and rapport is key

We need to create spaces that make people feel they want to open up, practitioners can do this by not being so invasive on what they are asking and the way they are asking questions. Open questions can help too, as can face to face communication. It can be really difficult for people to feel comfortable enough to share their mental and or/physical health needs: being seen in person can help practitioners to visually see and hear any changes to their health needs. When you see these changes though, the first instinct should be to try and provide support to the person in crisis, rather than immediately start enforcement which could damage relationships with the practitioner and the Probation Service.

2. Importance of being person-centred

We need to be more person-centred, giving individuals the safe spaces that support them to be willing to open up about their issues, but also allowing them to have involvement and responsibility in their plans. It can also really help to come to meetings with knowledge and awareness of different courses and opportunities (e.g., volunteering) that can be tailored to

people's interests. I found it really helpful where my practitioner was aware of organisations I could progress through and encouraged me to make the most of these.

Asking the right questions is integral, but the way you ask them is more important. Often things can be said but taken in two different ways. Tone can be very difficult to interpret over text and this is particularly important when working with people with neurodiverse conditions (such as autism, which is often undiagnosed) who may not process things the same way that you assume they would.

3. We need to work in partnership

Taking a person-centred approach, recognising that not one size fits all, means we need to work closely together. That involves recognising the challenges practitioners face too. The most beneficial outcomes for individuals and the practitioner come when plans are developed in partnership.

4. We need to take a more trauma-informed approach

We need to be more trauma-informed and aware of people's pasts and triggers. With probation and other services, I kept asking myself: Why do they keep re-asking questions when I have already told my trauma, a difficult and emotional thing for me to do, to so many people? We need to remember that, for some people, they may just need a little more time to open up, particularly if it's the first time they have ever spoken about their experiences.

Vibes and auras are also important, you may not want to talk to someone based on the way they look at you. Space is important too: offices should be made to feel more welcoming and less formal, to help put people in relaxed headspaces to let go and talk about experiences more openly.

We can work towards all these points TOGETHER. Valuing lived experience is a key element to this, including peer mentoring or a buddying system. People with lived experience are in every prison and probation office already, we are an untapped resource for working towards our shared aim: tackling root causes that drive the cycle of crisis and crime. Lived experience can bring something that books can't, but as we can also learn from those books, working together is key.

On probation you sometimes have to figure out who you are, what your strengths are, and that's really hard. Having an advocate with lived experience when you first enter the system asking: "*Do you need any support?*", can make all the difference.

Thank you for reading my thoughts, I never thought I'd be published in Probation Quarterly. If you also have lived experience and would like to share your valuable insight, please do talk to the editor as lived experience articles are really encouraged.

I am also proud to tell you that I have been a peer researcher on lots of research projects, including a project looking at people's experiences of remote communication in probation. Clare's story (below) really connected with me and I hope we can work together to improve support for people like Clare who really need it.

Clare (not her real name) was assessed as medium risk and was given a supervision order of two and a half years. She had mental health issues that were exacerbated by the process of re-gaining custody of her child having spent time in prison.

Clare had a great relationship with the first probation officer she was assigned. Clare felt that this officer demonstrated from their heart that they wanted to help, making her feel that this officer 'just got it' and was 'my type of person'. Unfortunately, after 3 months this officer moved to a different part of the country, so she was assigned a new officer. Her relationship with the new officer was not as positive and Clare felt she did not provide her with the kind of help she needed. Clare describes how this new officer used to want to 'fish [for further information] a lot about my ex', when Clare did not go to probation to talk about her ex (as this was in the past). Instead, she wanted to talk about more current and pertinent issues to her rehabilitation such as regaining custody of her child, moving house as staying in her current accommodation re-triggered difficult memories associated with her ex, and the financial difficulties she was facing, particularly around PIP (Personal Independent Payments) applications that were denied. She describes how this new officer offered no support with the PIP appeals process and only provided her with a number at the Department of Work and Pensions to call. As a result of not getting the help she needed from her probation officer, Clare describes how she: 'Did not know what way I was going. I didn't know who I was, where I was and where I was going'.

This frustration around not getting the help she needed was exacerbated by having to get three busses to the probation office, taking her half a day to travel each way. She felt that her relationship with her officer felt like a 'hi and bye system', only a quick check-in as her officer seemed to not want to provide the additional support she needed, for example to navigate the benefits system effectively.

An incident involving her ex-partner served to further damage her relationship with her new probation officer. One of Clare's license conditions was that she was barred from associating with her ex-partner, but both were assigned to the same probation office. A mistake was made by the probation office that led to Clare and her ex-partner leaving the building at the same time. They exchanged a few quick pleasantries as they walked out together (but very quickly went their separate ways). However, social services were called, and this negatively impacted her application to regain custody. Whilst this was probation's mistake, Clare was blamed. She eventually got an apology from social services for the mistake, but her probation officer never apologised. She felt disrespected by her probation officer as a result, and this made her more reluctant to ask for the help she needed. Despite having these concerns and feeling that her relationship was irrevocably damaged, Clare did not want to complain as after being passed around, she felt there could also be the risk that she could be assigned to an officer she got on with even less.

It was only towards the end of the Order, when she fell pregnant, that Clare felt her probation

officer opened doors and opportunities to her. Up until this point, after 15 months of supervision, Clare felt her officer was very reluctant to put her on programmes to support her rehabilitation, for example peer mentoring training courses, as though she did not trust her. Frustratingly these opportunities came just as she had less time and energy to dedicate to them, due to the pregnancy. It was also only at this point that Clare was referred to the local women's centre. She felt the workers at the centre understood her, her history and where she was coming from. If she could not attend a group meeting, they would take the time to call her to catch her up and they also took the time to support her with an application for a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP), providing her with the form and completing it with her. This application for a DHP, which was approved, was used to make the bedroom of the child she was applying to regain custody of more comfortable, supporting her application. She felt she could have had this support much earlier if probation had helped her with the application or referred her to an organisation like the women's centre.

As Clare had been the victim of domestic violence, and was still at risk, she felt face-to-face contact with probation was essential to her. She felt remote contact would not have been suitable as she could not then read the body language of her probation officer. She also felt probation couldn't recognise the signs that she may be at risk, and so could not offer help:

"You don't know what's happening behind closed doors. How would they know I didn't have a bruise on my leg? Things are not always so noticeable on video calls".