‘Jennifer’ & ‘Jane’s Experiences of Probation:

The Institutional Promise

The Probation Service defines itself as a vital statutory pillar of the criminal justice system. Its stated mission is to supervise offenders—whether serving community sentences or transitioning from prison—with a focus on "strengthening the probation practitioner’s relationship" with those under their care. The service aims to use "key skills, activities, and behaviours" to achieve effective outcomes, promising consistent management, better risk assessment, and balanced caseloads. For those leaving custody, an "enhanced pre-release system" is intended to provide a seamless transition through comprehensive assessment and tailored sentence plans.

However, when these high-level objectives are measured against the reality of the front line, a different picture emerges. The experiences of Jane and Jennifer suggest that the "consistent management" promised by the service often gives way to a "tick-box" culture and logistical chaos.

Jane: A Cycle of Instability

Jane’s journey began with a tragedy; she served three and a half years in prison for death by careless driving, followed by an equal term on probation. While she initially managed to build a rapport with her probation officer, John, his departure signalled the start of a revolving door of supervision.

Rapport is a cornerstone of the Probation Service’s own philosophy, yet Jane found it impossible to maintain. After John left, she cycled through multiple officers. One female officer saw her only once before being removed from the case; it later emerged that the officer knew the family of the person killed in Jane’s accident. This conflict of interest should have been flagged immediately, but Jane realised that her case notes were either not being passed on or were simply not being read by new staff.

This administrative neglect was matched by a lack of physical security. Jane often found herself waiting outside locked probation offices for up to 45 minutes, standing among male offenders who overheard her name being called. This left her feeling exposed and insecure. When one officer suggested home visits to alleviate this, the officer frequently forgot to turn up. Jane, ever diligent, felt compelled to keep a digital trail of these missed appointments to prove she was not the one breaching the terms of her licence.

Perhaps most disappointing was the lack of genuine rehabilitation. Despite her own eagerness to engage, Jane found the available courses to be woefully inadequate. A course titled ‘Thinking Skills’ felt pitched at a primary school level, and even her own probation officer described another accredited programme as "rubbish." When it came to resettlement, the system nearly failed her entirely. It was only after her teenage daughter repeatedly called the probation office that a place was found for Jane in a hostel just days before her release. The hostel was a "frightening and dangerous" mixed-gender environment where Jane, as the only female, was too terrified to use the shared kitchen. Even after moving to a flat with the help of a charity, she remained surrounded by socially disruptive behaviour, feeling neglected by a service that spent their brief, five-minute appointments exchanging mere pleasantries.

Jennifer: Lost in the System T

he experience of Jennifer, an 18-year-old student, highlights the system's failure to accommodate vulnerability. Convicted of a serious driving offence, Jennifer was spared prison but sentenced to community service and RAR (Reducing Reoffending Activities) days designed to provide tools for women to reduce re-offending. In fact probation's mental health report and sentencing recommendation were ignored by the Magistrate and the number of community service hours was doubled.

From the outset, the system struggled with the basics of logistics. Because of "probation availability," after the first few visits, Jennifer was assigned to an office two hours away from her home. As she was on benefits, the cost of the journey was prohibitive. While the government provided a rail warrant—which Jennifer found embarrassing to present to conductors as it stated that she was on probation —it did not cover the taxis required to reach the station from her rural home. Without financial help from her relatives, Jennifer would have had to choose between eating, paying rent and attending her appointments. These appointments, the round trips for which took four hours of travel, often lasted as little as three minutes. When appointments are reduced to three-minute administrative checks, the opportunity for "strengthening relationships" vanishes.

As for the RAR days, 5 minutes of a programme called 'Impact' for low risk offenders was offered at one of Jennifer's visits, early on before she was sent to an office over two hours away, but when she asked at that about fulfilling the RAR days, she was told that she didn't need to do them, even though they were on her sentence plan, because they did not offer them at that office. This has left her very anxious lest she is found to blame for missing this aspect of her sentence.

The lack of specialised care for a vulnerable teenager was a recurring theme. At one point, Jennifer was ordered to board a van with much older men for manual work, despite being designated for a female-only environment. When she expressed fear, she was threatened with a legal breach of her probation. Communication was so poor that the officers themselves admitted they "didn't know what to do with her" to aid her rehabilitation.

When Jennifer began university, the system effectively lost track of her. She went two and a half months without an appointment, eventually having to "nag" the service to find her a new officer. When she finally attended an office near her university, she found herself in a waiting room with offenders who were intoxicated. Intimidated and out of her depth, she received no support from the staff to move to a safer area.

No support or supervision from probation was provided when Jennifer was doing community service at a charity shop. Other male staff also doing community service there tried to sell her drugs. She declined because she is not a drug taker but felt under considerable pressure. When she attended probation appointments, she found they did not have an accurate record of how many hours she had worked there and twice suggested to her that she had finished her hours when she had not.

To Jennifer, the entire process felt like a "waste of time"—a sentiment compounded by the fact that her licence will be restored without any requirement for further driving tuition, raising serious questions about the service's ability to manage public risk.

A System of "Tick-Boxes"

The accounts of Jane and Jennifer suggest that the Probation Service's stated goals of "positive change" and "effective outcomes" are being undermined by a lack of funding, high staff turnover, high caseloads and poor communication. For these two women, probation was not a path to rehabilitation but a series of hurdles to be cleared.

The "enhanced" pre-release support and "balanced caseloads" described in official literature seem, in practice, to be replaced by a culture where showing up and having a "box ticked" is the only priority because the service is stretched too thinly.

Fragmented relationships with officers, lack of personalised support, and unsafe environments undermine offenders' ability to progress, potentially increasing frustration and risk of reoffending.

In both cases, the offenders themselves had to drive their own progress—Jane by tracking her own appointments and Jennifer by chasing the service for her own supervision. Rather than being supported, they felt "set up to fail" by a system that was too overstretched to see the human being behind the case file. The experiences of Jane and Jennifer suggest a "gender-neutral" probation system that, in practice, fails to account for the specific vulnerabilities of women.

Final Summary

It's clear from the accounts of Jane and Jennifer that there is a significant "implementation gap" between the Probation Service's official aspirations and the ground-level reality. Using their stories as a narrative framework really highlights the human cost of those systemic failings. Their stories reveal that probation often feels more like a bureaucratic hurdle than a rehabilitative process.

Such issues, as in Jennifer's case of probation's sentencing advice being ignored, could in some instances compromise rehabilitation and public safety. Ultimately, the Probation Service appears to be a system under such significant strain that it has lost sight of its own guiding principles. For Jane and Jennifer, the "positive changes" in their lives have happened **despite** the system, not because of it. Instead of the probation practitioner acting as a catalyst for "positive change," the offenders themselves had to manage the bureaucracy to ensure they didn't fail their sentences.

Without a move toward more consistent management and a genuine assessment of gender-specific risks, the service remains at risk of simply "ticking boxes" while the individuals behind the files continue to feel neglected and unsafe.

The evidence supports a call for reforming probation practices, promoting deeper engagement with offenders, improving programme quality to protect both offenders and community interests, and ensuring environments conducive to rehabilitation and social reintegration, particularly for vulnerable populations. These reforms are essential to uphold public trust in the justice system and contribute meaningfully to reducing reoffending.

Probation Reforms: thoughts from the woman who wrote up J & J's experiences
There needs to be a shift away from high-volume, low-depth caseloads. Probation officers must be given the time and resources to move beyond pleasantries and actually deliver the "Thinking Skills" and RAR tools or other programmes promised in sentence plans.

It will be good if more probation officers can be recruited, but they must be fully trained,

Finally, the government is working on protecting women and girls and as part of that, women and girls in the criminal justice system should also not be forgotten and be part of the government's plans.

m/HMP/ 2026 Prob stories