



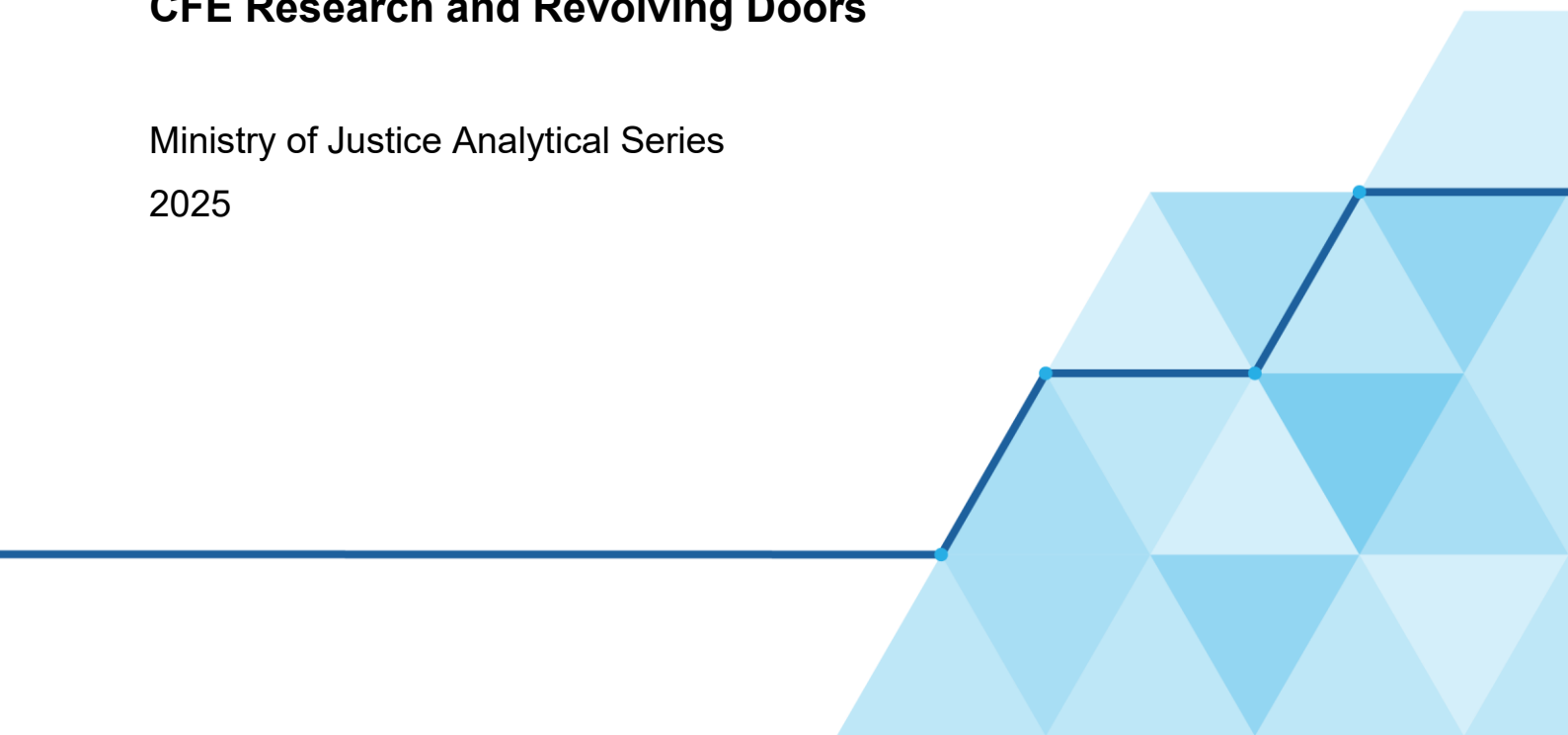
Ministry
of Justice

Process evaluation of the Intensive Supervision Courts pilot

Final Report

CFE Research and Revolving Doors

Ministry of Justice Analytical Series
2025



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CFE Research and Revolving Doors

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Glossary

ATR	Alcohol Treatment Requirement – a judge or magistrate can include as part of either a community order or a suspended sentence order where there is a clear link between alcohol dependency and offending behaviour, and the individual consents to treatment and is willing to comply.
DRR	Drug Rehabilitation Requirement - a judge or magistrate can include as part of either a community order or a suspended sentence order where the offender who is dependent on drugs or has a propensity to misuse drugs, and the individual consents to treatment and is willing to comply.
EPF	Effective Proposal Framework - a digital tool used by probation practitioners at pre-sentence stage and as part of pre-release planning to identify requirements, licence conditions and interventions for individuals based on their risk and need profile.
HMCTS	HM Courts and Tribunals Service
HMPPS	HM Prison and Probation Service
ISC	Intensive Supervision Court
MHTR	Mental Health Treatment Requirement – a judge or magistrate can include as part of either a community order or a suspended sentence order where the individual has a mental health problem (including personality disorders and neurodevelopmental disorders) which do not require in-patient treatment and the individual consents to treatment and is willing to comply. Someone can have a MHTR alongside a DRR or ATR where multiple needs are identified.
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
OASys	Offender Assessment System - Offender Assessment System used by HMPPS to measure risks and needs of offenders under probation supervision
PIP	Personal Independence Payment
PSC	Problem-solving court
PSR	Pre-sentence report

RAR	Rehabilitation Activity Requirement - one of the requirements that can be included within a community order or suspended sentence order. The court specifies the maximum number of RAR days that someone can be instructed to participate and which activities to take part in to help their rehabilitation, tailored to their specific needs (e.g., accommodation, debt, relationships). Relational approach – an approach that emphasises connection, belonging and the teaching of effective conflict resolution skills, and which approaches behaviour with curiosity rather than judgement.
SM	Substance misuse Substance Misuse (SM) Court – One type of Intensive Supervision Court that focused on individuals whose offending behaviour is driven by problems with alcohol and/or drugs. Trauma-informed approach - an approach to health and care interventions which is grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development.
WEMWBS	Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale – a trusted tool to measure mental wellbeing and impact.
WRNA	Women's risk needs assessment – a comprehensive gender-responsive assessment tool specifically designed for women involved in the criminal justice system that asks about people's needs and strengths to help identify what is needed to address the root causes of their justice involvement.

1. Summary

1.1 About the Intensive Supervision Courts pilot and the evaluation

Intensive Supervision Courts (ISCs) apply a problem-solving approach to divert offenders with complex needs away from short custodial sentences and into enhanced community-based sentences with support to address the underlying causes of their offending. ISCs combine intensive supervision from the Probation Service with wraparound support from a range of local services, overseen by a dedicated ISC judge.

The ISC pilot comprised two substance misuse (SM) courts in Liverpool and Teesside Crown Courts, and a women's court in Birmingham Magistrates' Court, all launched in June 2023. A third SM court operating in Bristol Crown Court launched in June 2024.

CFE Research and Revolving Doors were commissioned by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to undertake an independent evaluation of the ISC pilot. The evaluation is mainly a process evaluation with some indication of early outcomes achieved. The evaluation used a mixed methods approach, combining analysis of monitoring data, an online survey of staff and stakeholders, observations of pilot activity and qualitative interviews with staff, stakeholders and people with an ISC order. Alongside this, MoJ are planning a separate impact evaluation and value for money assessment.

1.2 Key findings and considerations for any future roll-out

By the end of March 2025, 194 people had received ISC sentences from the four pilot sites. Of these cases, 78 per cent were either ongoing or had been successfully completed.

Staff across the pilot generally agreed that the eligibility criteria were appropriate and that the pilot had reached the right people. However, the SM courts miss those who have committed lower-level offences that are not heard in crown court. Extending SM courts to magistrates' courts could potentially open the opportunity to divert people from custody at

an earlier stage before their offending escalates. Awareness raising activity with the police, judiciary and defence professionals should take place to ensure potential candidates are referred to ISCs.

The evaluation evidence indicates that people on the ISC received support tailored to their needs. ISC participants had a range of interacting and complex needs, including experience of domestic abuse, unresolved trauma and undiagnosed neurodivergence. The pilot provided flexibility to address people's changing needs quickly. Having dedicated ISC probation staff with smaller caseloads of just ISC cases was key in facilitating the necessary intensive and tailored support. However, high staff turnover within ISC probation teams in some areas, which occurred in the context of staff shortages across the Probation Service more generally, meant that some staff were working with more individuals on an ISC order than expected.

Generally, compliance with orders was good. In most cases, rehabilitation activity requirements were attended and complied with. Progress can be highly individualised and addressing substance misuse difficult. Staff would welcome more options for incentives and sanctions to encourage engagement with support and guidance on what can be realistically expected in terms of reducing or ceasing use of drugs or alcohol.

Partnership working across local services was necessary to meet people's varied support needs. Partnerships generally worked effectively, with efficient sharing of information to inform decision-making. The involvement of the police was important in facilitating access to data. To be eligible for an ISC order, people need to be in stable housing. Safe and appropriate accommodation is also important to enable people to address substance misuse. A lack of suitable and affordable accommodation can make this difficult. Greater involvement from local housing services could improve partnerships' ability to address housing problems.

Mental health problems were particularly prevalent, with 60 per cent of people on the ISC having a mental health treatment requirement (MHTR) as part of their order. Screening for mental health problems should be standard for all potential ISC candidates to identify needs early and plan for appropriate support. Timely access to appropriate mental health treatment, including for complex trauma, is essential to address the underlying causes of

people's substance misuse and offending. This was not always available during the pilot and probation and other staff were left to manage situations they were not trained to deal with.

The women's court in Birmingham helped to develop greater understanding among partnership members of women's offending and there is a clear need for this dedicated, specialist service. A trauma-informed approach was particularly important when supporting women, including the co-location of services in single-sex spaces where the women felt safe.

Continuity of staffing was important to the success of the pilot. This included having the same judge at each review hearing. The evidence shows that relationships developed between judges and people on the ISC and that this was pivotal to motivating people to comply with their order and sustain positive changes in their lives.

Up to March 2025, 54 ISC cases had been closed. Of these, 12 people had successfully completed their order. The other 42 had either had their suspended sentence activated due to non-compliance or their order had been revoked and they had been re-sentenced, for example because of a further offence. This also included some cases whereby women were moved out of area due to safeguarding concerns. The number of completed ISC sentences is currently low. The ISC courts began sentencing from June 2023 (for Bristol, June 2024) so very few sentences would be completed by March 2025 and are not indicative of a completion rate.

Overall, there is encouraging evidence of positive outcomes. These include increased feelings of self-worth, a desire to stop offending and improved family relationships. Some people on the ISC self-reported reductions in substance use and this was corroborated by staff observations. Related to this, there is evidence of positive improvements in people's mental wellbeing and physical health. There was a statistically significant increase in the average score on the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) between the start of support and follow-up nine months later. People on the ISC have taken part in education, training and volunteering and some have secured employment.

Participation in the pilot has also had a positive effect on partnership members, with staff reporting better understanding of complex social issues, enhanced professional skills, greater awareness of local services and what they provide and a renewed sense of purpose and satisfaction with their roles.

2. Introduction

2.1 About the Intensive Supervision Courts pilot

Intensive Supervision Courts (ISCs) combine intensive supervision from the Probation Service with wraparound support from a range of local services, overseen by a dedicated ISC judge.

ISCs are a type of problem-solving court (PSC), whereby offenders with complex needs are diverted from short custodial sentences into enhanced community-based sentences that address the root causes of their offending.

The Ministry of Justice's (MoJ) 'A Smarter Approach to Sentencing' White Paper identified PSCs as a key approach to addressing offenders' individual needs, with the aim of reducing reoffending and enhancing the effectiveness of rehabilitation within the UK criminal justice system (MoJ, 2020). It outlined a commitment to pilot up to five PSCs in England and Wales for certain groups, such as prolific offenders with substance misuse needs and vulnerable female offenders. This pledge was reiterated in the government's 10-year drug plan 'From harm to hope', which committed to implementing Dame Carol Black's key recommendations investing in initiatives to reduce the supply and demand for drugs and deliver a high-quality treatment and recovery system (HMG, 2021; Black, 2021).

Evidence indicates that community sentences are more effective in reducing reoffending than short-term custodial sentences and there is recognition that increasing the use of community orders is likely to result in a decline of reoffending, which would result in long-term savings (Eaton and Mews, 2019; Justice and Home Affairs Committee, 2023).

Internationally, there is good evidence that PSC approaches can be effective for specific groups, including adult drug users. In Greater Manchester a PSC for women showed promising results in relation to reoffending, compliance and partnership working (Bowen and Whitehead, 2015; Kinsella et al., 2018). However, there is limited evidence about the effectiveness of problem-solving approaches in the UK due to inconsistent implementation and evaluation (Mentzou and Mutebi, 2023). Therefore, the principal aim of the pilot was to

test and evaluate whether problem-solving approaches in England and Wales can achieve the desired effect of reducing reoffending and improving the health and wellbeing of the individuals involved.

The ISC pilot comprised two substance misuse (SM) courts in Liverpool and Teesside Crown Courts and a women's court in Birmingham Magistrates' Court, all launched in June 2023. A third SM court operating in Bristol Crown Court launched in June 2024.

The SM courts were designed for people whose offending behaviour is driven by problems with drugs and/or alcohol and who would have otherwise received a custodial sentence of up to two years or a high-end community sentence. The women's ISC worked with women with multiple complex needs, such as mental health issues and/or experience of domestic violence, and who would otherwise have received a short-term custodial sentence of up to 12 months.¹

To be eligible for an ISC order, candidates must be aged 18 or over on the day of the conviction and reside in postcode areas which fall within the pilot areas' boundaries. They must also consent to the sharing of personal information between participating agencies/bodies and sign an ISC participation agreement during the pre-sentence report (PSR) stage. A guilty plea is not necessary, but eligible candidates must show motivation to address their problems and indicate a willingness to engage with the ISC pilot programme. Those charged with specific offences are not eligible for an ISC order and probation staff screen out where it is deemed there is an imminent risk to the public and/or identifiable victims.² Those with a prescription for medical cannabis are also ineligible. Judicial discretion to determine eligibility for sentencing through the ISC remains. In addition to these overarching criteria, each individual ISC has its own criteria, as summarised in Table 2.1.

¹ Between June 2023 and November 2024 this was up to 6 months, and up to 12 months thereafter reflecting changes to magistrates sentencing powers.

² These include any firearms related offence, any index offence under Sexual Offences Act 2003 (part 1), if the individual is listed on the Sexual Offenders Register for a previous offence (i.e. persons subject to Notification Requirements under the Sexual Offences Act 2003), any conviction for possession of a knife/offensive weapon which is not a first-time offence and use of knife/offensive weapon (including if used to threaten or cause fear).

Table 2.1: Summary of eligibility criteria for each pilot site

Birmingham women's court	Liverpool SM court	Teesside SM court	Bristol SM court
• Female offenders, • eligible for a custodial sentence of up to 12 months or suspended sentence, and • at least one criminogenic need, such as mental health or problems with drugs and/or alcohol. • Judicial discretion can be applied for those facing longer sentences.	• Male and female offenders, • eligible for a short-term custodial sentence up to two years, and • whose offending is linked to use of drugs and/or alcohol. • Judicial discretion can be applied for those facing longer sentences.		
	Additional exclusions: individuals who are flagged as linked to an Organised Crime Group.	Additional exclusions: individuals who commit summary offences (such as shoplifting).	

Under the ISC an individual will receive a community order (CO) or suspended sentence order (SSO). There is a strong focus on Community Sentence Treatment Requirements (CSTRs) given the aim to improve the health and wellbeing of ISC participants. Any order made during the pilot period will have the ISC provisions applied for them for the duration of the order (i.e., up to a maximum of three years for a community order).

ISC orders include at least one punitive requirement such as electronic monitoring conditions or unpaid work. As part of ISC sentences, judges can also impose standalone drug testing requirements in instances where the individual does not meet the criteria for a DRR or where it is deemed suitable to have a combination of both the DRR and drug testing (i.e. for longer community orders).

2.2 About the evaluation

CFE Research and Revolving Doors were commissioned by MoJ to undertake an independent process evaluation of the ISC pilot.

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- Provide an understanding of experiences of roll-out and early implementation in each pilot site, considering enablers and barriers of delivery across the different contexts.
- Share emerging findings across the different ISC sites to help improve delivery as the pilot progressed.
- Identify short-term outcomes and early successes to inform prospective designs and potential larger scale roll out of similar policies in the future.

Many of the questions addressed by the evaluation relate to whether activities were delivered as intended, and whether these then produced the desired changes for core partners, wider stakeholders or individuals on the ISC. The overall research questions were as follows:

1. Who is assigned an ISC order?
2. Are individuals complying with their order?
3. What are stakeholders' perspectives on the ISC?
4. How successfully have ISCs been implemented?
5. How successfully do ISCs operate in practice?
6. Are individuals successfully completing their ISC order?
7. How well do the post-order completion procedures operate within the ISCs?

The process evaluation is one strand of a larger evaluation strategy to be undertaken over a longer timescale and managed by MoJ, including a separate impact and economic evaluation.

2.3 Method

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data. Ethical approval was obtained from University of Greenwich Ethics Committee.

This report draws on research activities completed between September 2024 and May 2025. These comprised:

- Analysis of pilot monitoring data supplied by MoJ,
- An online survey with pilot staff and wider stakeholders,
- Observations of sentence hearings, review hearings and partnership meetings at each of the three pilot sites,
- Qualitative research with pilot staff, wider stakeholders, and individuals on the ISC.

Monitoring data included details about ISC participants, their pre-sentence reports and sentence information and their progress on the order. It was taken from OASys, nDelius and the Effective Proposal Framework digital tools used by the Probation Service.

The survey intended to gather a broader understanding of attitudes and perceptions than reached through the qualitative methods. It was a follow up from the baseline survey reported on in the interim report and had more focus on outcomes rather than early implementation. It received 79 complete responses in total (18 from Birmingham, 16 from Bristol, 17 from Liverpool and 28 from Teesside).³ See Appendix 1 for a full breakdown of survey respondents.

Over the course of the evaluation, 109 qualitative interviews were completed with staff involved in the pilot in some way and 68 interviews were completed with people on the ISC. These included longitudinal interviews with some of the same respondents to discuss change over time. In total 11 interviews with people on the ISC were longitudinal, meaning that we were able to include nearly a third of the 194 people on the ISC in the evaluation. We spoke to a range of people on the ISC across a broad age range and with differing needs and experiences. Table 2.2 below summarises the interviews by pilot site and respondent type.

³ Compared to 55 responses from the baseline survey conducted between December 2023 and February 2024

Table 2.2: Breakdown of qualitative interviews

Participant type	Birmingham women's court	Liverpool SM court	Teesside SM court	Bristol SM Court⁴	Total
Judiciary and court staff	4	7	5	5	21
Police and probation staff	13	10	11	8	42
Support and treatment providers	9	5	11	5	30
Other stakeholders	1	5	5	5	16
People on the ISC	23	19	20	6	68

Limitations and Caveats

The survey sampling method means survey results may not be representative of all stakeholders and may be biased toward those with strong views who responded. In particular, very few responses were received from staff and organisations with a stake in the pilot but who were not involved in planning or delivery, such as housing providers.

Court and probation staff obtained consent from people on the ISC to be contacted by the research team. Therefore, those individuals on ISC suggested by areas and who agreed to take part may represent more positive cases.

This evaluation took place between June 2023 and May 2025. This time frame has meant that it has not been possible to capture longer term outcomes and that there is not yet a comprehensive cohort size who have completed their order.

Further detail on the evaluation method and ethical considerations can be found in Appendix 1.

⁴ The total number of interviews was lower in Bristol because the pilot started 12 months after the other sites

Note on terminology

This report refers to 'ISC orders' and 'people on the ISC' for succinctness. These terms are used to describe those with community orders or suspended sentence orders that are being managed through the ISC pilot model.

3. The pilot cohort

This section outlines who has been assigned an ISC order and assesses the extent to which stakeholders believe that participants in the pilot programme are suitable for it.

Each site has taken a slightly different approach to identifying candidates. These are summarised in Table 3.1.

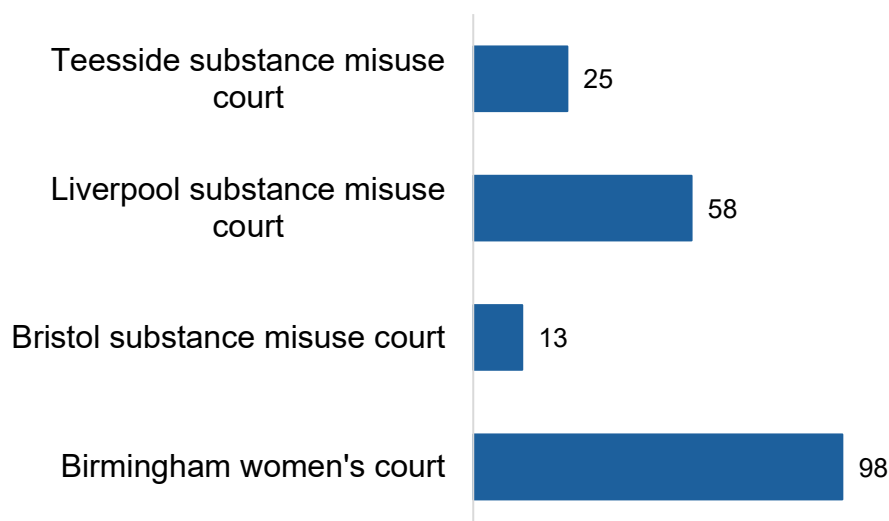
Table 3.1: Approaches to identifying potential ISC candidates

Birmingham women's court	Liverpool SM court	Teesside SM court	Bristol SM court
District Judges determine whether women in the magistrates' court meet the custody threshold. The Police list women charged with imprisonable offences into the ISC court to support this process Suitable cases are adjourned to allow for probation and local partners to conduct the PSR before women have the option to consent to the ISC order.	Designated probation court officer is responsible for identifying potential ISC candidates when PSR requests are made after the plea and trial preparation hearing, or upon PSR being committed from magistrates' for sentence at the crown. Intention that judges and legal professionals flag potential cases too.	The police notify probation of potential cases and probation identifies cases themselves via police data on recent arrests. A dedicated police staff member also helps to identify potential candidates considering who has recently been charged.	Probation ISC team screen from list of PSR requests that come through from the magistrate's court. Check with wider partnership to see if they have had any contact with the individual as part of the PSR process. Intention both ISC and non-ISC judges and legal professionals flag potential cases too.

By the end of March 2025, 194 people had received ISC sentences. Overall, women made up a slightly larger proportion (55%), largely due to the high numbers in the Birmingham women's court. Men largely made up the SM courts: just nine women received ISC orders from the SM courts. However, many of those with a sentence from the women's court also had substance misuse problems. Of the 121 people with a drug rehabilitation requirement, 55 per cent were men and 45 per cent were women.

Figure 3.1: Number of ISC sentences up to March 2025 by pilot area

Source: MoJ monitoring data.



There were gendered patterns in the main offence types of people on the ISC. Drug possession or supply was one of the most common offences amongst people on the ISC and this was mainly committed by men. Theft (mostly shoplifting), violence and assaults on emergency workers were the other most common offence types and all three were largely committed by women.

The majority of the ISC orders were for either 24 months (72%) or 18 months (20%). The remaining orders were for 12, 21 and 36 months.

Staff across the pilot generally agreed that the eligibility criteria were appropriate (see Figure 3.2) and that the pilot had reached individuals who could benefit from it

Figure 3.2: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the eligibility criteria are appropriate for identifying people who will benefit from an ISC sentence?

Total respondents: 63. Source: ISC staff and stakeholder survey.



■ Disagree strongly ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree ■ Agree strongly

The ISC pilot was designed to divert people who would have otherwise received custodial sentences. However, staff and stakeholders highlighted that the **SM courts were missing those who have committed low level offences that are not heard in the crown court.** This reduces the potential for ISC to intervene and divert people from the criminal justice system at an earlier stage before their offending escalates. There was also a desire for greater flexibility and use of judgement on eligibility. An example cited in several pilot sites was the criterion excluding people guilty of weapons offences. Staff argued a distinction should be made between possession of a bladed article and use of a weapon.

“It just feels like you're excluding a cohort of young men who can be rehabilitated at a really important time...Sadly this city has way too many of people who are carrying weapons. I think there was a bit of concern from partners that perhaps we were excluding people who actually would benefit from this level of intervention.” (Court professional)

In addition, **expansion beyond the current pilot postcodes was suggested in some areas.** In Bristol, there have already been discussions about including ISC cases from South Gloucestershire as the probation team also cover this area.

Most pilot sites felt that candidate identification processes had improved over time, resulting in greater numbers of ISC orders. One staff member described this as “quite a slick process now.” **Involvement of police in local partnerships was particularly important in enabling pilot sites to identify suitable individuals.** Police involvement helped staff access intelligence quickly to check whether any of the exclusion criteria applied (such as being involved in organised crime). There were also examples of the police referring potential ISC candidates to the ISC.

Awareness of the pilot among the wider judiciary and defence community is important for referring potential cases. Probation staff at one of the ISCs screened all cases committed to the crown court to identify potential candidates but this was very resource intensive. Early judicial involvement in decision-making was also useful to reduce

the risk of the ISC team completing pre-sentence reports for people who the judge then determines are unsuitable.

People with ISC orders had a range of interacting complex needs. The Offender Assessment System, or OASys, records offending-related needs across eight categories including drugs, relationships, employment and attitude. In every category except alcohol, over 50 per cent of people on the ISC had an identified need. Some staff commented that the level of need was higher than expected and included factors such as experience of domestic abuse, undiagnosed neurodivergence or learning difficulties, unresolved trauma and mental health issues. Nonetheless, staff believed the ISC order should be offered to individuals in challenging circumstances.

“We're dealing with difficult cases. If they were easy, they wouldn't be there.” (Court professional)

Data shows that illicit drug use was common. Up to March 2025, 73 per cent of individuals who joined the ISC reported drug use either daily, weekly, monthly or occasionally. Many ISC participants used more than one type of drug. Cannabis was the most common drug used by ISC participants (used by 27 per cent of individuals on a daily basis), followed by crack/cocaine and heroin.

Motivation and readiness for change were said by probation and other staff to be critical when identifying ISC candidates. Staff explained how they would try to ascertain whether someone thought it was the right option for them or not during the PSR process. When discussing those who did not consent to an ISC sentence, staff explained that it was often individuals who “were not ready” for the level of supervision involved.

“One of the most important things we're looking for is their motivation to actually do it. You go through with them the intense nature of the order, and explain it all to them, because it's something that they will have never known before. You need to get an initial feeling of are they going to be up for it.” (Probation staff member)

Some staff believed the pilot would work particularly well for younger people whose substance use was less entrenched. It was also felt to be easier to identify employment and/or training opportunities for this group.

“Some of the younger lads, they seem to be ready to go straight away. So, their needs and focus might be employment to start with or getting them straight into some training.”
(Probation staff member)

Some people on the ISC who took part in the evaluation reported low awareness beforehand of what an ISC order would involve. They did not always realise how intensive it would be. There were examples of people who knew that it was an alternative to custody, but who had limited understanding of the requirements beyond this at the start of their order. This was despite pilot staff taking care to explain what the order would involve. Even when information was provided in court or during the PSR process, people on the ISC reported they did not always retain it due to stress or the volume of information they received.

“They did say I'd be on a probation service for 12 months, and I would have to come several times a week. That's basically all I was aware of.” (Individual on an ISC)

4. Supporting people with an ISC order

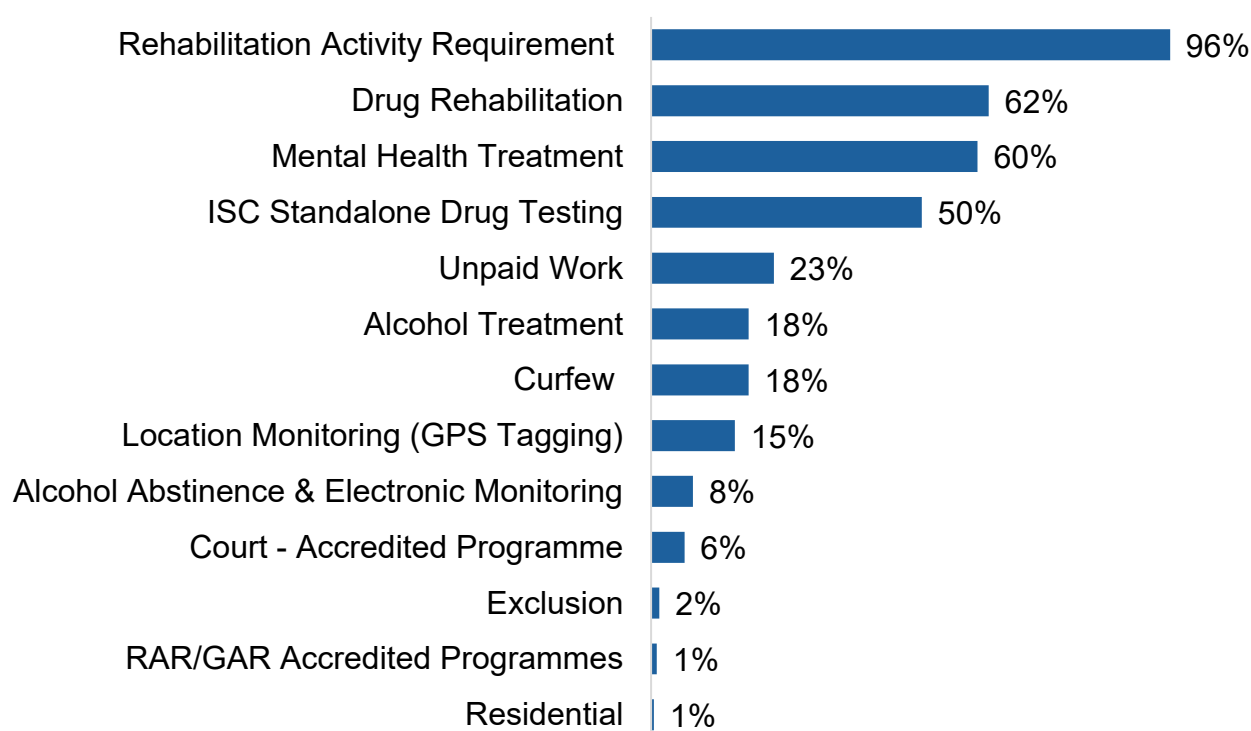
This section covers the support that people on an ISC sentence receive and the role that the partnership approach plays in this.

4.1 Tailored support

The ISC pilot aimed to provide wraparound support tailored to meet individual's needs. Figure 4.1 shows the requirements of people on the ISC up to the end of March 2023. Most people (96%) have a rehabilitation activity requirement (RAR). This can include activities such as courses or sessions at a women's centre. Other frequently mandated requirements include drug rehabilitation and mental health treatment.

Figure 4.1: Proportion of people with different ISC order requirements

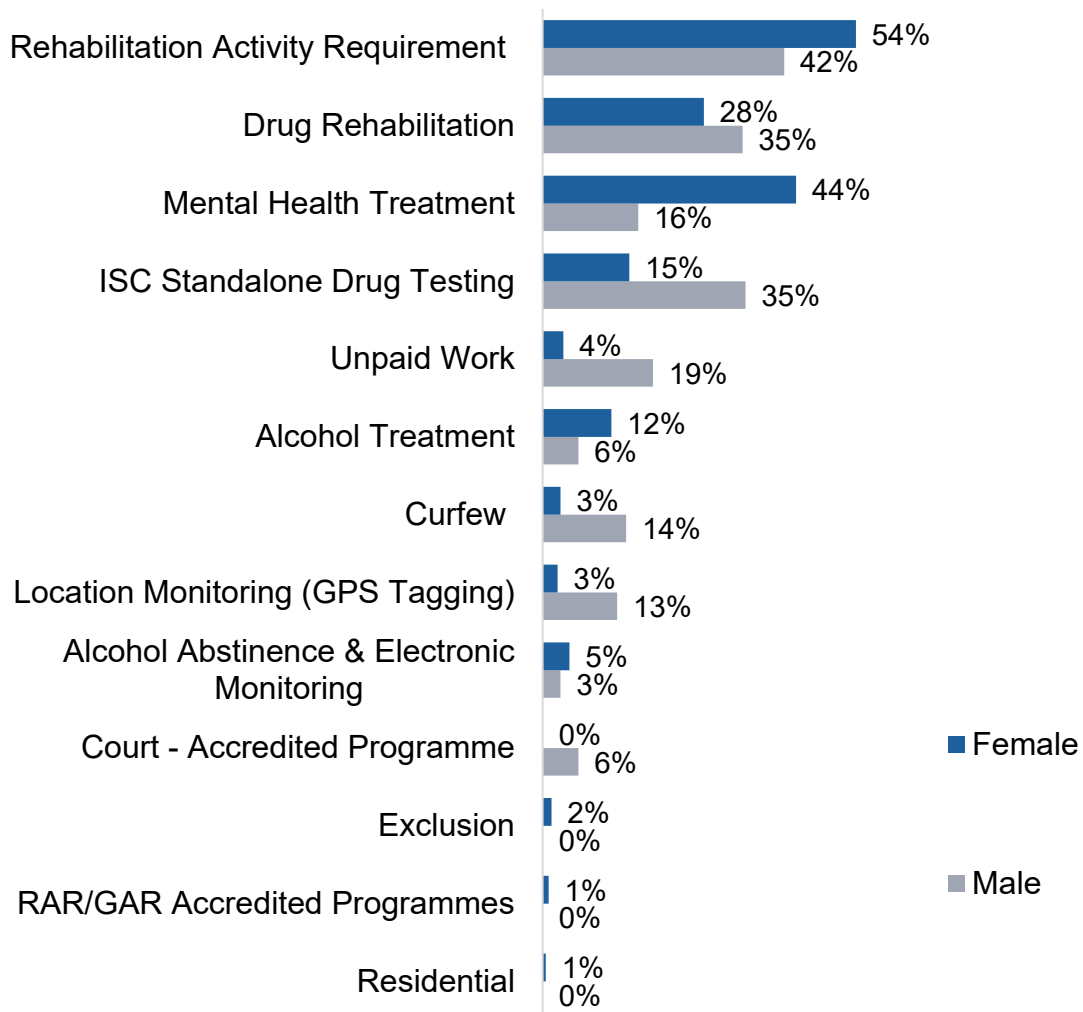
Base = 194. Source: Monitoring data. Percentages do not sum to 100 as people have multiple requirements.



There were gender differences with ISC order requirements as shown in figure 4.2. In the Magistrates Women's ISC model, judges took the view that the ISC order is punitive enough due to the intensity of the order. Therefore, unless there is justification on a case-by-case basis, a punitive requirement (UPW, curfew, fine etc.) was not required. Additionally, it is likely that more women had a MHTR because screening for this was included upfront in the women's court.

Figure 4.2 Proportion of people with different ISC order requirements

Base: Female = 107, Male = 87. Source: Monitoring data. Percentages do not sum to 100 as people have multiple requirements.

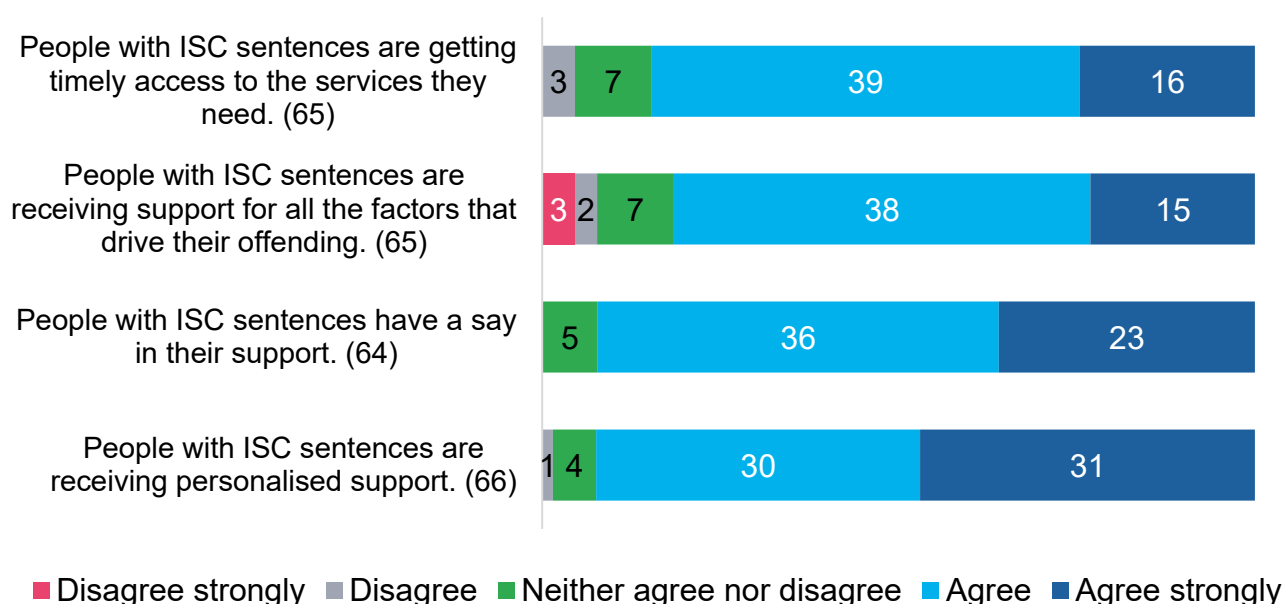


Survey respondents generally agreed that people with an ISC sentence received tailored support – see Figure 4.3 below. Judges and practitioners alike noted that the ISC model enables a level of personalised support and judicial oversight that is unachievable in standard probation settings.

“We’re enablers... what we do is not doable in the business-as-usual world.” (Court professional)

Figure 4.3: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about support provided by the ISC pilot?

Total respondents for each statement in parentheses. Source: ISC Staff and stakeholder survey.



Staff highlighted that their ability to offer tailored support was linked to what was available locally. Having partners who were knowledgeable about local services was therefore key. The Activity Hubs have been particularly helpful in keeping people busy and helping them to develop skills.⁵

⁵ Activity Hubs are commissioned by HMPPS and provide safe spaces in the community for people on probation to access support and take part in a wide range of activities.

Some younger people on the ISC SM pilots were anxious about taking part in group activities and found it harder to relate to older people with drug problems. Some staff also suggested more tailored support for younger people whose main drug of choice was cannabis.

“Without sugar-coating it, putting you in a room with a gang of smackheads at the very start of things, it should always be one-to-one. It has to be one-to-one.” (Individual on the ISC)

Staff agreed the flexibility to address people’s fluctuating needs quickly through the ISC sentence was important. This includes the ability to extend someone’s drug rehabilitation requirement (DRR) or alcohol treatment requirement (ATR) or add further treatment options where a support need was identified.

“We’ve seen that changes can be made on the day, rather than probation having to put applications in to vary things. If a DRR expires and they feel it’s beneficial and they’ve consented to being extended, it just gets extended there and then... So, that side works really well.” (Drug and alcohol treatment provider)

People on the ISC were grateful where staff were flexible about appointment times and worked with them to fit these around their other commitments.

“I was worried about going twice a week as it disrupted my volunteering [and] I have contact with my son and so we had to work around that. I am a very busy person, but they knew I was genuine, so they moved things around” (Individual on the ISC)

Continuity in staffing was highlighted as both unique when compared to other community orders and important to the success of the ISC approach. This included having the same judge in each review hearing and the probation officer who wrote the PSR going on to support the individual throughout their sentence. As people on the ISC

had frequently experienced abandonment and disruption in previous service relationships, consistent staffing played an important role in allowing trust to build over time.

“When I've done DRRs before, it wouldn't necessarily be the same bench [at the reviews]. It could be different. They might not have met that person before. They might not have a full understanding. I feel like the main difference, from what I'm perceiving, is that the ISC feels much more meaningful for that person. It is more meaningful for me, working within this way, as well.” (Support provider)

Probation staff had smaller caseloads of only ISC cases. This was considered key in their ability to offer tailored support because it allowed them to work more intensively and flexibly with people on the ISC. Several people with an ISC order also noticed the difference between ISC probation staff and those they had previously engaged with. People on the ISC explained that practitioners had helped them navigate and access services, advocated for them and chased up appointments.

“I've been on probation for years and years...This is the only order I've ever got to the end of and completed, because these people, here, say it how it is. If they're going to do something, they do it.... If you've got a problem here, they'll sort it, it's good. ... It's nice, you look forward to coming. Normally, when it's probation, you're like, 'Ugh,' but I really look forward to coming.” (Individual on the ISC)

However, **high staff turnover in probation teams adversely affected caseloads in some areas.** The specialist nature of the ISC meant that cases could not be passed on to non-ISC probation officers. As a result, fewer staff had to take on a greater workload and caseloads grew more than intended. Staff changes also increases the risk that people on the ISC have to repeat information and “re-live all the trauma” because it meant that probation officers changed from PSR and/or throughout people’s sentence. Recruiting to ISC probation teams was challenging in the context of wider staff shortages across the probation service (HMIP, 2025a).

Resourcing was a challenge identified across most organisations that took part in the evaluation. Partners who provided support discussed struggling to meet demand, which could compromise the quality of support. Although many people on an ISC sentence require help with mental health, **waiting times for mental health services were an issue across the ISC pilot sites.** This includes waiting times for MHTRs and to access mental health support run by local charities. This reflects challenges in access to mental health treatment outside the criminal justice system. A recent survey by the Care Quality Commission (2025) revealed that a third of people who accessed community mental health services had waited three months or more for their first treatment. In 2022/2023, Birmingham and Solihull and Tees Valley were among areas with the highest average waiting times between referral and access to talking therapies for anxiety and depression (Baker and Kirk-Wade, 2024).

Staff and people on the ISC expressed their frustrations at not being able to access the help needed and this can hamper engagement with the sentence.

“The women who are getting sentenced to a mental health treatment requirement, they're not being seen for 8, 9, 10 months. So, I think if mental health is a barrier for their engagement, you've gone a whole year without having any intervention.” (Probation staff member)

In Birmingham in particular, it was highlighted that the primary community-based mental health treatment requirement provision does not always meet the needs of women experiencing complex trauma.

“We're not a complex trauma service... we don't have psychiatrists... but we're seeing this group of very vulnerable women.” (Support provider)

Where there were limitations in the availability of clinical support probation and partner agencies were having to fill these gaps, which strained resources and proved stressful as they were left to manage crisis situations alone (albeit in some cases with advice from the MHTR team).

4.2 The role of partnership working in providing support

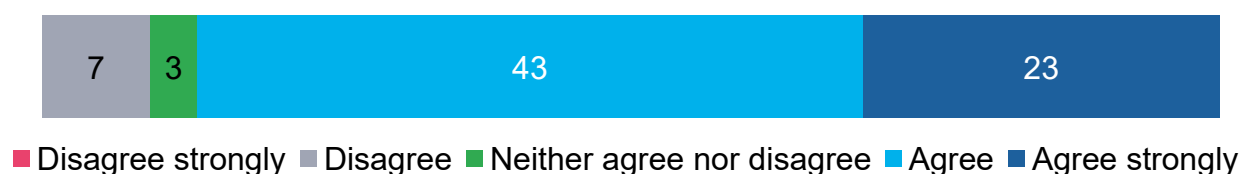
The ISC pilot was delivered in a challenging context. The pilot ran when the criminal justice system was under pressure from court backlogs, a crisis in prison capacity and probation staff shortages (Brader, 2025; Committee of Public Account, 2025; HMIP, 2025b). Delivery has had to keep pace with policy changes in response to these wider national challenges. Therefore, it was important to have a shared culture and understanding across the ISC pilot partnerships, with good staff awareness and buy in, including at a senior level and among those not delivering support.

The interim evaluation report explores the setup of the pilots in detail (CFE Research and Revolving Doors, 2024). This found that having the operational team in place before launch helps to build crucial understanding and relationships. This finding is supported by the experience in Bristol, which began delivery after the other areas. Stakeholders credited the work done by a senior probation staff member to get the right partners involved before the pilot went live. Pre-existing relationships also made co-location and data sharing agreements more straightforward to establish.

There was broad agreement across the survey respondents that the right organisations were involved in delivering the pilot – see Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that all the necessary partners are involved in delivering the ISC pilot?

Total respondents = 76. Source: ISC Staff and stakeholder survey.



The exception to this was the lack of involvement from local authority housing teams. Staff did sometimes attend partnership meetings and engage with pilot staff, but their capacity to get involved was often limited. People are required to be in stable housing

to be eligible. The lack of suitable housing for potential ISC candidates means the expert input of housing teams would be welcomed.

“I think probably the biggest gap is with the housing providers. There's one instance where trying to get them onto the housing register has been so difficult... [the housing team] don't want the open conversation, it's just, 'Bring them in for an appointment, and they'll be dealt with like anybody else.' Realistically, without accommodation they can't have the order.” (Police staff member)

Recommissioning of drug and alcohol services and the Activity Hubs (see page 13) has also presented challenges for the areas where this has happened. The recommissioning process created uncertainty whilst partnerships waited to learn who was successful and led to gaps in support while the new provider set up. Although there have been some staff changes, where staff have been transferred to the new provider, this consistency has been helpful for partners and people on the ISC.

For many pilot sites, **the ISC pilot has significantly improved the efficiency of information sharing and decision-making processes.** Weekly partnership meetings and direct lines of communication have replaced perceived slow and fragmented inter-agency interactions.

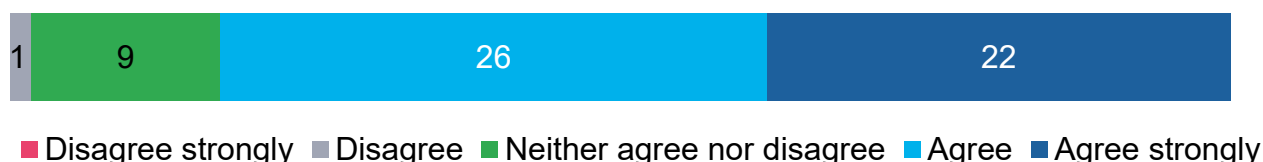
“I can get [information] almost immediately... we've got all of these contacts, direct contacts... which I didn't have access to before.” (Probation staff member)

4.3 Meeting the needs of women

This section of the report explores how the ISC's design and delivery responds to the specific experiences of women. Most survey respondents agreed that the support available through the ISC pilot is tailored to the needs of women – see Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that support is tailored to the specific needs of women?

Total respondents = 58. Source: ISC staff and stakeholder survey.



The ISC pilot in Birmingham has worked towards a better understanding of women’s offending through its assessment process. As well as jointly conducting assessments with key partners, the women’s court often draws on gender-responsive assessment frameworks, such as the Women’s Risk and Needs Assessment (WRNA), to identify issues that standard assessments might overlook. These include histories of trauma or abuse, parenting status and caregiving responsibilities.⁶ This was considered important because women’s mental health and vulnerabilities often present differently than men’s and require a different lens. A mental health practitioner explained that the framework had “profoundly increased the understanding of the needs of women.”

Mental health practitioners in Birmingham welcomed the approach of mental health teams screening every ISC case, rather than relying on referrals from probation officers. This was said to greatly increase the chance of identifying unmet needs early.

“With ISC, we can now actively screen every case... we’re not missing anybody now. Before, we only got referrals if a probation officer noticed a mental health issue and remembered to refer.” (Support provider)

A trauma informed approach is particularly important when working with women.

The importance of delivering probation and support services in a single-sex, co-located setting was highlighted in the interim report, and the emphasis on women’s centres as an

⁶ The Women’s Risk and Needs Assessment (WRNA) is a gender-responsive tool developed specifically to assess the risks, needs, and strengths of women involved in the criminal justice system. The WRNA assesses mental health, trauma and abuse history, substance use, parental stress and childcare responsibilities, relationships, housing and financial stability, self-efficacy and motivation, social support and community connection, employment and education

effective model was also evident in the latest interviews, building on the existing evidence base (Women in Prison, 2022; MoJ, 2015). Both professionals and people on the ISC explained how the women's centres provided both physical safety and emotional reassurance, as women often feel unsafe in mixed-gender probation offices, particularly if they have experienced domestic or sexual abuse.

"Men could trigger you and it [the women's centre] felt safe." (Person on the ISC)

Co-located services were also more accessible, further contributing to the trauma-informed approach. This was further enhanced by the assessment framework which reduced the need for women to retell painful stories to multiple agencies.

It was evident that professionals require specific skills to work with women who have experienced trauma. Practitioners frequently told us that working with women who had experienced trauma was not a popular decision in their profession due to the complexity of the challenge. These complexities include histories of trauma, unstable housing, child removal, substance misuse and mental health problems. Staff need to be open to supporting women with these experiences. However, having got to know the women and understand their lives, several staff reported that they now saw the work as a "privilege." A flexible, relational approach is essential and allows practitioners to adapt to women's shifting needs, fostering engagement in ways that traditional approaches may not.

"You do this dance with them... trying to keep in step with them." (Probation staff member)

However, one practitioner explained that a trauma-informed approach must not mean that women are never held accountable. In this context, it is crucial that ISC breach mechanisms are used consistently and proportionately.

Where women required the support of adult social services, practitioners said this was rarely available at the point of need, further increasing the pressure on probation workers

and partner services. In addition, one practitioner highlighted how gaps in children's services could also have a detrimental effect on women where their children needed additional support.

Access to suitable childcare is important to allow many women to engage with their ISC order. Women's centres were able to provide some, but childcare was not always readily available. However, as an alternative to a custodial sentence, the ISC offers a way to reduce the likely damage to children of imprisoning women with children in their care.

5. Compliance and progress

5.1 Compliance

There was broad agreement among staff and partners that people on the ISC have consistently shown a good level of compliance with the requirements of the order.

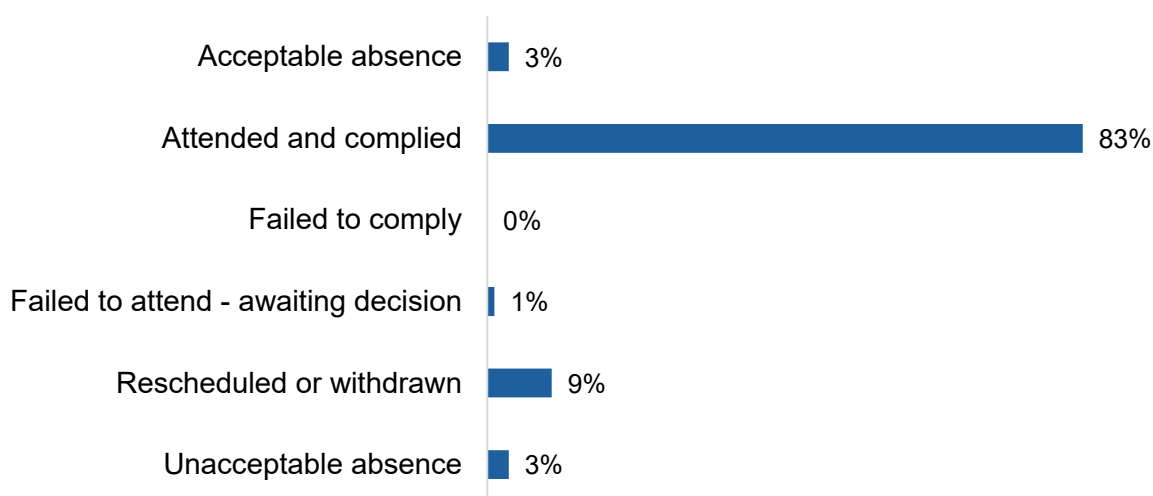
People on the ISC were said to generally attend their review hearings, appointments with probation and other support providers as well as other requirements of the order.

“Generally, everyone has actually attended all of their appointments. I've not had anyone miss one yet. I've had someone be late, but that's expected sometimes, and that was fine.” (Support provider)

This perception was reflected in the monitoring data, which showed that in most cases, people on the ISC complied with their rehabilitative activity requirements (RARs) – see Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Outcome of RAR contacts

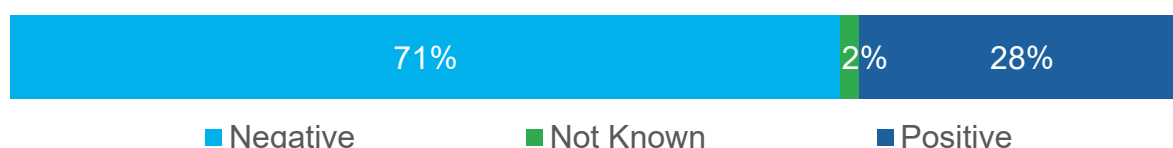
Base = 1,456 contacts (activities/appointments/events) - August 2023-March 2025. Source: MoJ monitoring data.



Up to the end of March 2025, people on the ISC (across all sites) tested negative for drugs 71 per cent of the time on average. This included people on a DRR and those who were required to have standalone drug tests as part of their order.

Figure 5.2: Average rate of drug test results for people on the ISC

Base = 134. Source: MoJ monitoring data.



It is important to note compliance and the related progress made by each person on the ISC is highly individualised. Staff from all pilot sites described how each person with an ISC order is on their own journey and highlighted that addressing addiction in particular is a long-term process. While one individual may make substantial progress within a few months, another may not do so until they enter the second year of their ISC order. With many leading ‘chaotic lifestyles’ prior to their sentencing, the ISC order provides a routine and structure that some have not experienced before. Several people on the ISC attributed their compliance and progress to the support they received from ISC staff. Encouragement and positive relationships are critical to people having positive experiences on the order.

“The good thing about this is they [ISC staff] don't expect you to hit the ground running. They really do understand and you can tell they actually care, it's not just a job to them.”
(Person on the ISC)

However, staff highlighted a difference between those individuals who actively engaged with the order and those who complied with requirements but are otherwise unengaged. Staff described how it became obvious early on when an individual lacked the motivation to make changes. Some probation workers felt that with this group there could be a risk of reoffending when external pressure, such as the threat of custody, was reduced.

Pilot staff would welcome additional levers to encourage better progress among those who were attending all their appointments and reviews but not necessarily engaging with the support or working to address their substance use. Some felt entering breach proceedings in the circumstances would not be justified.

“What do you do with the on the surface compliant, they turn up for the meetings when they're supposed to, so they're not in breach, not committing offences... But their drug use just is not changing... They're not really making an effort... How can we just shimmy them along?” (Court professional)

Encouragement from supportive family or partners appeared to enable engagement with the order. Observations of review hearings revealed several examples of a parents or partners being present and contributing information. In contrast, other people on the ISC were in what they considered to be difficult relationships that negatively influenced their behaviour and substance use. There were also examples of individuals whose living accommodation made it difficult to address their substance misuse, for example other tenants using drugs or drinking. This further underlines the importance of people with an ISC order being in appropriate housing.

“Because it's a hostel, you've got sin bins in the toilet. You got blood up the walls. You've got all these junkies who knock on your door looking to score. And they house me in something like that and they think I'm gonna stay clean” (Individual on the ISC)

Caring responsibilities could be a barrier to engagement for some (see section 4.3). Work commitments also made attendance at reviews or appointments more difficult for some. An ISC order was not thought to be suitable for people in full time employment as they would struggle to fit all the requirements in around work.

5.2 Role of the judge

People on the ISC attend review hearings with a judge on a regular basis where progress and order requirements are discussed. Depending on progress, the frequency of review hearings may be reduced.

Both staff and people on the ISC strongly believed that judges play a critical role, helping encourage progress. People with an ISC order described how the judge acted as both an authority figure and friendly face, capable of handing down sanctions and punishments, while also providing guidance and praise. Members of the judiciary described how they play multiple roles within the order.

“Sometimes you've got to be very judgy again, when they're going off track. You're threatening them, you're saying, 'This is not working.' Other times, you're almost an avuncular friend. When they're doing really well, and you're giving them all the praise and the encouragement. Sometimes, it's a bit more like a social worker, 'Why haven't you gone to see your GP?' Why haven't you got your anxiety medication looked at? What about your mental health? Has anybody accessed counselling for you?” (Court professional)

The evaluation evidence indicates that people on the ISC in all sites built positive relationships with the judiciary. For many, the judicial review process motivated them to do well as they did not want to disappoint the judge.

“I don't want to let [them] down. So, when I feel like kicking someone's head in, I think of [the judge], if that makes sense...How can I explain to her I've punched someone's head in when I'm doing so well? That's a little weight, a positive weight on my shoulders...When someone's got that little bit of thought for you... I take everything in that she says, and I try and do my best so when I go back, I can say I've done better than I started two weeks before.” (Person on the ISC)

Most ISC participants had the same judge at each review. Continuity of judge proved beneficial in developing trusting relationships with people on the ISC participants. Reviews being held on the same day of the week helped people on the ISC get into a routine. ISC judges were balancing pilot commitments with their wider judicial responsibilities and, as the number of people on the pilot increased, there were concerns about capacity.

“Our judges are very much doing this alongside listing long trials. So, at the moment, because the numbers are still relatively low, it's not a problem, but it could become one”
(Court professional)

The environment for hearings varied between pilot sites. As discussed in the interim report, in some areas judges de-robed or removed their wig and asked probation staff to sit alongside them during review hearings. This demonstrated joint working and highlighted the unique nature of the ISC order. Additionally, where the person on probation was asked to sit in the witness box rather than defendant dock this helped to remove barriers and facilitated conversation. Nonetheless, across all pilot sites people on the ISC order who took part in interviews acknowledged the friendly, empathetic approach of the judge who oversaw their case.

“[Judge] treated me like a human being. Which is good...I was shocked, to be honest with you because, obviously, with him being a judge and me being a criminal, as they say, you expect them to be like, 'Ugh', like, looking down at me and that but [the judge]... spoke to me like I was on his level, like I was just a normal person.” (Person on the ISC)

Informal interactions between the judge and pilot staff, such as partners spending time in judge's chambers between hearings also seemed important in relationship building.

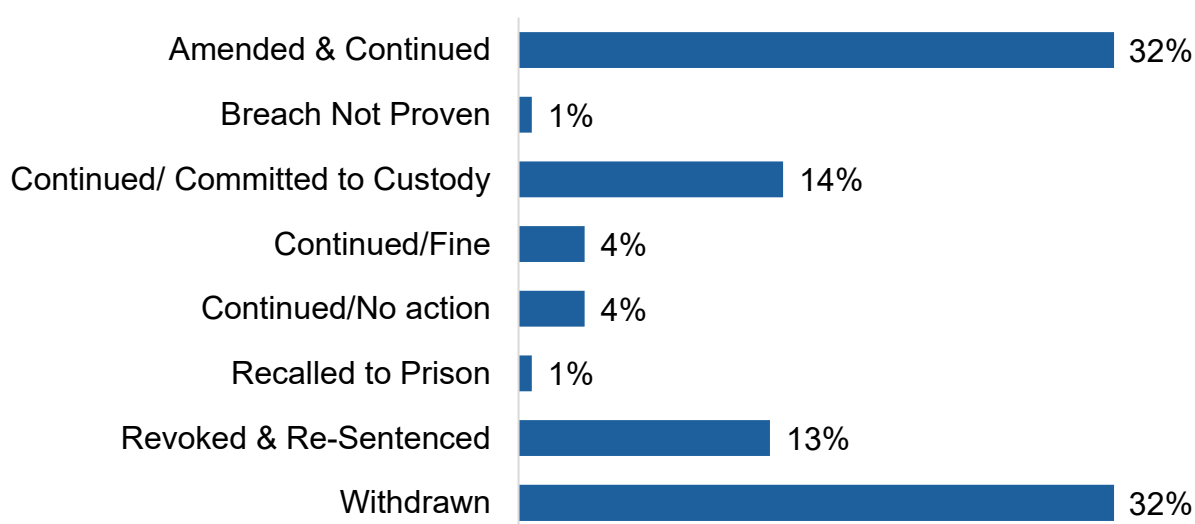
5.3 Incentives, sanctions and breaches

People on the ISC may receive incentives in recognition of engagement and progress or sanctions where they are not complying with the requirements of their order.

Monitoring data showed 66 per cent of ISC cases up to March 2025 had not faced any sanctions for non-compliance with the order or for committing further offences. There were breach proceedings proven against 34 per cent of offenders. The most frequent outcome of a breach was a change to the order, such as adding requirements or a curfew, and the resumption of the sentence, or the breach being withdrawn, for example because there was evidence of a valid reason for missing an appointment – see figure 5.2. There were 20 cases where a short-term custodial sanction was used.

Figure 5.3 Outcomes of ISC breaches

Base = 141. Source: MoJ monitoring data. Note, not all breaches have outcomes recorded in the monitoring data.



An aim of the ISC approach was to have a more responsive and effective breach process.

Overall, there were mixed views on breaches and their effectiveness. Some staff felt that it was important to be understanding and give people on an ISC sentence chances, and others felt a harder line should be taken sooner.

“They've got to recognise we retain the authority, at the end of the day, if they don't do what they're supposed to do, then there can be consequences, which I think is an important part of the order as well.” (Court professional)

Some stakeholders thought that although the threat of short-term prison sentences can be helpful for some, they may be less effective for people with a lot of previous experience of prison.

“He's been in prison all his life. He doesn't care. It might work for some people... it wasn't a threat to [person on the ISC] ... Whereas some of them would absolutely have a fear of God because they've not been to prison, it would work.” (Probation staff member)

Staff also highlighted the challenge of rebuilding trusting relationships once someone had been breached.

“They're going to come out and be exactly how they are, but then you've got to try and re-build a relationship with these people which can be kind of tricky really.” (Probation staff member)

There was a desire among staff to have more options of sanctions and incentives to encourage engagement. Judges often wanted more involvement in decisions about choice of incentive.

5.4 Completions and early terminations

Up to March 2025, of 194 ISC cases, 151 (78%) were either ongoing or successfully completed. Fifty-four (28%) cases had been closed. Of these, 12 (6%) people had successfully completed their ISC order, including at least one person who had their sentence terminated early due to good progress. The remaining 42 (22%) had not completed and had either had the suspended sentence activated, or had the order revoked and been re-sentenced, for example because of a further offence. The number of completed ISC sentences is currently low. The ISC courts began sentencing from June 2023 (Bristol, June 2024) and very few sentences were expected to be completed fully by March 2025; these figures are therefore not indicative of completion rate.

In the final six months of their ISC order, probation officers will start to discuss managing people's exit and how to ensure that they can continue to make progress, particularly what action they will take if they are at risk of setbacks or difficult situations.

Some people on the ISC feared what might happen after the end of their order, feeling that they might struggle to maintain their mental health without the structure and connection that the pilot had brought.

"I just don't know what's going to happen after. Like, you get used to all this support, people caring what happens to you... and then suddenly it's over. That scares me."
(Person on the ISC)

However, professionals felt confident that relationships built and access to wider support would be helpful, in particular the women's centres and Activity Hubs, which can be accessed for up to 90 days after the end of a sentence.

Very few of those interviewed had completed their order or had it terminated early in recognition of good progress. Those who had understood they could recontact services in future if need be.

"They have made it clear that I am able to go back and get help so that is some comfort. I can go to someone who knows me." (Person on the ISC)

Even where orders are not successfully completed some staff and stakeholders could still see progress and benefits for people on the ISC.

"Even if she comes back again in six months, she knows there's another way now. That's something." (Probation staff member)

It was only possible to interview one person on the ISC whose order had been revoked and who had received a custodial sentence. They took responsibility for not completing the

order and explained how they intended upon release to visit services discovered as part of the ISC order.

A graduation ceremony is held with the judge and support staff to celebrate the achievements of those who successfully complete their order. This was appreciated by interviewees and staff were also positive about the role of the ceremony.

“I walked into a courtroom, and everyone was standing up clapping, do you know what I mean? And I was like, 'Wow, that's a change.' Normally, you walk in a courtroom and everyone is dead serious...everyone was there...a room full of 30 people all clapping me and applauding me and that...I walked out of there with, like, a little smile on my face.”
(Individual on the ISC)

6. Outcomes

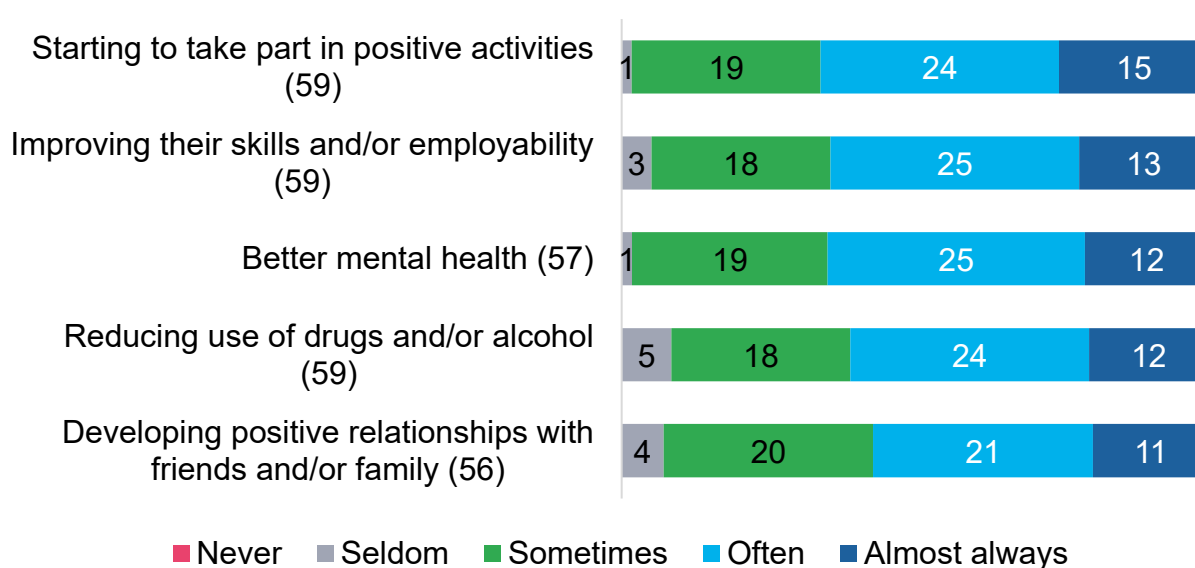
This evaluation is predominantly a process evaluation, with a separate impact evaluation and value for money assessment planned by MoJ. However, this chapter provides some evidence of early outcomes.

Overall, **survey respondents reported seeing positive changes in people on the ISC** sometimes or often. See Figure 6.1. Stakeholders widely agreed that the ISC pilot was both effective and efficient. Several felt the ISC pilot represented a meaningful departure from previous initiatives, with tangible benefits for individuals in contact with the criminal justice system and the system itself.

“This is the first [pilot] that I’ve been involved with that I really feel is making a big difference... potentially, is literally life-changing for people.” (Court professional)

Figure 6.1: How often are you seeing the following changes among people with ISC sentences?

Total respondents for each statement in parentheses. Source: ISC staff and stakeholder survey.



One of the desired outcomes of the pilot was increased recovery capital. The concept of recovery capital was developed to help explain the factors which help people recover from substance misuse (HMIP, 2020). The remainder of this chapter is organised by types of recovery capital.

6.1 Family and social recovery capital

Family and social recovery capital includes networks of friends, family and neighbours who can provide support in difficult times.

There is evidence of improved relationships and social engagement among people on the ISC. Some people on the ISC re-established connections with estranged children, partners, or parents. For example, one woman's children moved from being on child protection plans to having no formal social service involvement, which she directly attributed to her progress on the ISC. In another case, a person on the ISC explained that their children were likely to move home again within the next year due to their good progress on the order.

One person described how they went to their sister's birthday party for the first time, whilst another reflected on their improved ability to engage with loved ones over Christmas.

Engagement with peers was also highlighted as an area of progress. The opportunity to form new, positive social ties, particularly in women's centres, helped reduce isolation.

6.2 Personal recovery capital

Personal recovery capital includes mental and physical health, as well as an individual's values, perceptions of self and educational or vocational skills.

There is evidence of positive changes in self-perception and self-esteem among people on the ISC. People on the ISC often described themselves as 'new people' and spoke of a transformation in how they saw themselves and their past actions. This included no longer identifying with their offending past, developing self-worth and feeling emotionally stable and in control.

A few people on the ISC explicitly said the programme ‘saved their life’ or gave them a reason to hope and plan again. This was evident in more than one area, and the sentiment was echoed by staff.

“I feel a sense of pride coming back, massively. I felt horrible last time, there was no pride in me, I feel all that changing. Self-confidence, I feel good about myself. Yes, all that’s definitely improved, massively.” (Person on the ISC)

Many people interviewed reported **a stronger desire to stop offending**, especially due to the supportive environment. Several described becoming more reflective, accountable and committed to doing things differently. They felt they were better able to understand how their circumstances and lifestyle had led to crime and had a better sense of their own personal ‘triggers’.

There is evidence of **positive changes in people’s mental wellbeing**. The seven question version of the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) was used to assess mental wellbeing at the start of ISC support and again nine months later or on exit from the order, whichever is the longer.⁷ This showed a statistically significant increase in mental wellbeing. The necessary data was only available for 34 people on the ISC and most of these are from the Birmingham women’s court so should be treated with caution, although the sample is greater than the minimum sample of 30 required by WEMWBS.

A consistently reported outcome was a **reduction or cessation of substance use**. This was seen as a turning point, with several support staff and people on the ISC highlighting it as a catalyst for broader changes. One woman, previously using Class A drugs daily and engaged in high-level shoplifting, had become drug-free for nine months and was now working with police and MPs on crime prevention efforts. Another, initially using cannabis

⁷ WEMWBS is a validated measure of mental wellbeing developed by the University of Warwick and the University of Edinburgh. The 7-question scale provides a more concise version of the original 14 question scale. For further information see <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/innovations/wemwbs/>

daily, was able to stop and redirect her money toward life goals like driving lessons and improving her family life.

“[The person on the ISC] now doesn't smoke. He smoked, like, 100 spliffs a day, and [now] nothing. He's completely drug free. He's been keeping all of his drug tests up on his wall, so we got him a framed certificate.” (Court professional)

Reductions in use of cannabis were often cited. However, more entrenched use of class A drugs among older people on the ISC was said to be more difficult to influence.

Reductions in drug use were reported to have affected other areas of people's lives, including improved physical and mental health.

“I'm a whole lot more active than I used to be because I always used to be stoned out of my head...But now, I can get up and start doing stuff around the house. Like, I'd take the baby to the nursery and that. I never would have done that before. I would have just stayed in bed. I'm sorting the back garden out properly, like, for the summer and that” (Person on the ISC)

Having professionals to talk to about their feelings and concerns was particularly useful for some people on the ISC and this had benefits for their mental wellbeing.

“Having them there, just sometimes it helps getting things off your chest. The more I keep something bottled up inside that's the more I get a trigger... it helped me massively... I'm grateful.” (Person on the ISC)

Some people gained employment during or following their ISC order. Some were inspired or supported to take up voluntary roles or pursue education or training at a local college. There was also interest among people on the ISC in becoming a peer mentor. This was seen as a potential pathway to empowerment and employment. Employment, whether part-time or full-time, was considered a major personal achievement, especially

for those with long criminal histories or health conditions. Staff reported seeing a greater sense of purpose among people on the ISC.

“I'm starting to look, work-wise, getting out, getting back to being productive and useful, sort of thing, and I think that's my next step. Like, starting to feel useful, doing something, where I couldn't manage that before. I didn't feel very useful at all, I just felt like a drain.”
(Person on the ISC)

“He's never done anything in his life. He's never passed a qualification. Never sat an exam. He's just passed his Railtrack course.” (Probation staff member)

Some people had secured more stable and suitable housing during the order. The stability achieved through the programme often allowed people to access housing services more effectively. The link between suitable housing and reduced substance use or improved mental health was made repeatedly – see section 4.2.

Improvements in financial stability were also common in descriptions of outcomes provided by stakeholders and people on the ISC. Accessing benefits like Personal Independence Payments (PIP), budgeting support and assistance with debt lifted a psychological burden, often described as ‘life-changing’.

6.3 Wider effects of the ISC pilot

As well as benefiting people on an ISC sentence, **the partnership approach of the ISC appears to have had wider benefits for staff and services.** There were examples of involvement in the ISC pilot influencing professional development, collaboration, service delivery and the personal and professional fulfilment of the staff involved.

Staff, including judges, explained that they now had greater awareness of local services and what they offer. This is knowledge they can apply outside of the ISC. In at least one instance the judge had introduced reviews for non-ISC cases as they had seen the benefits of these.

“So, in my wider judicial role, I've got much more of an idea of what's out there and what can be done by probation, and I'm using occasionally a power which I don't think many judges have ever used, which is the power to review suspended sentence orders.”
(Court professional)

Another outcome of the ISC pilot has been the contribution to continuous professional development across participating agencies. Many stakeholders highlighted how working on the ISC pilot had broadened their understanding of complex social issues and enhanced their professional skills.

“It's certainly helped my development, studying what other people do... seeing the bigger picture of how it all fits together in a big jigsaw puzzle.” (Court professional)

The programme has fostered a deeper awareness of gender-specific issues, particularly those affecting women in the criminal justice system. Practitioners reported increased sensitivity to themes such as motherhood, trauma and perinatal mental health, which has led to calls for broader institutional training and practice changes in some partner organisations.

The ISC pilot has also had a powerful impact on the personal and emotional engagement of staff. The ISC is intensive not just for people with an order but for the staff supporting them too. However, many of those interviewed described a renewed sense of purpose and satisfaction in their roles, often contrasting it with previous experiences in more traditional probation settings.

“I love it. I love seeing the different aspects of who does what... It's been a confidence boost... It's pushed me out of my comfort zone in a good way.” (Probation staff member)

“We cry sometimes, but it's just so rewarding... You've had that honour to be on their journey of becoming drug free... This job is so rewarding.” (Probation staff member)

7. Conclusions and considerations for future roll-out

7.1 Conclusions

The ISC pilot programme has been delivered against a challenging backdrop: a time of extreme pressure on the criminal justice system, recruitment and retention challenges in the probation service and recommissioning of support services. The partnerships therefore deserve significant credit for the outcomes that have been achieved.

This process evaluation provides evidence to support the key assumptions outlined in the pilot theory of change (see Appendix 2). The pilot successfully reached people who would otherwise have received a custodial sentence and who were able to benefit from the support provided. There is clear evidence of relationships developing between the judge and the person on the ISC; this is pivotal to motivating people to comply with their order and sustain positive changes in their lives. The complexity of ISC cases require intensive, tailored and sustained work. The reduced probation caseloads and the holistic, collaborative model of support provided by a partnership of services creates the structure where such work is possible. The women's court has provided trauma-informed support, cognisant of the particular experiences of female offenders. Overall, compliance has been good and people on the ISC have responded positively to the structure provided by intensive requirements and the belief placed in them by the judge, probation staff and wider support teams.

Up to the end of March 2025, of the 194 ISC cases, 152 (78%) were ongoing or had been successfully completed. Forty-two were either revoked and resentenced or the suspended sentence activated. However, the evidence gathered on the impact of the orders is overwhelmingly positive. People on the ISC described developing a renewed sense of self-worth, agency and hope. They no longer saw themselves solely through the lens of their offences. For many, this was the first time they felt listened to and believed in. There is evidence of reduced use of drugs and, in some cases, sustained abstinence, and with it improved physical health and mental wellbeing. People on the ISC have re-established

relationships with family, undertaken training and education and, in some cases, secured employment. These achievements are particularly remarkable given the entrenched disadvantages many faced on receiving their sentence.

To summarise, the positive progress observed in the interim evaluation report has continued. Key factors were identified that have enabled the model to be implemented as expected and work well, and those which have made this more challenging. It would be beneficial for the pilot sites to continue to share learning and the efficacy of the pilots will be further explored through MoJ's planned impact and economic evaluations.

7.2 Considerations for any future roll-out

The Independent Sentencing Review (2025) recommended expanding the availability of Intensive Supervision Courts to address prolific offending. If the government chooses to take up this proposal and roll out the ISC model more widely, it will be important to consider the learning from the evaluation. The key considerations are summarised below.

Staff and stakeholders have highlighted the potential of ISCs to provide intensive support at an early stage before substance misuse and offending escalate. Consideration should be given to extending SM courts to magistrates' courts where many low-level offences driven by drugs or alcohol are likely to be heard. However, adequate investment and strategic planning will be necessary to ensure the scalability of the ISC model.

The high number of ISC cases at the women's court and the positive outcomes achieved also demonstrate the need for a dedicated service for female offenders. Specialist, trauma-informed support services should be co-located in single-sex spaces that women feel safe in.

Learning from the set-up phase demonstrated the value of, where possible, establishing the partnership and the core staff team in advance of launch. Partnerships should ideally include representatives of the police service, adult social care and housing services as well as probation and support and treatment providers. Stable accommodation is required for someone to be eligible for an ISC order; the quality and appropriateness of housing also plays a role in enabling people to address their substance use. For this reason, the

active involvement of housing services in ISCs is important and ways to incentivise this should be explored. Awareness raising activity with the police, judiciary and defence professionals should take place to ensure potential candidates are referred to ISCs.

ISC probation teams need to be sufficiently resourced to enable small caseloads, which are key to the intensive and tailored approach. Similarly, there needs to be sufficient court space and time for ISC hearings and reviews, and consideration of the number of judges required to make delivery consistent and manageable.

Staff buy-in to the ISC approach, and the partnership working that underpins this, has been key to success. Recruitment materials, including job specifications and adverts, should make clear the distinctive features of the ISC model and what working in this way involves. ISCs are intensive for staff as well as for the people on the order; it is important that staff have suitable support in place, such as clinical supervision, to safeguard their wellbeing and ensure they are able to complete the role to the best of their ability.

Although ISC staff explain what an order would involve, this was not always absorbed by people on the ISC. Materials that set out ISC expectations clearly, that potential candidates can take away and work through at their own pace, could be beneficial. These could build on the 'welcome pack' developed in one pilot area.

While overall compliance and progress is good, this can be very individualised and addressing drug and alcohol problems in particular can be challenging and slow. A wider array of sanctions and incentives that can be used flexibly to encourage and reward progress would be welcomed, as would greater guidance on what might reasonably be expected in terms of addressing substance use.

Mental health problems have been particularly prevalent among people on the ISC. Assessment for mental health problems should be standard for all potential ISC candidates in order to identify needs early and plan for appropriate support. It is essential that there is timely access to mental health treatment pathways, including for the effects of complex trauma, to address the root causes of people's offending and substance misuse. This will also help to prevent probation staff undertaking crisis management or having to provide care they are not trained for.

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Appendix 1

Additional method detail

Qualitative research

The evaluation team conducted **observations** across the four pilot sites to better understand pilot processes and local contexts. This method also allowed the team to learn more about delivery environments and ways of working. Detailed notes were taken using a template.

The evaluators also conducted **in-depth qualitative interviews** with partnership staff, wider stakeholders and people on the ISC in each pilot site to collect more detailed information on experiences and perceptions of delivery, views of barriers and enablers of success and what outcomes have been achieved.

Roles of interest for interview were identified in advance. The team then worked with key staff at each site to identify the specific individuals and invite them to take part. A snowball sampling approach was then used to ensure that a range of organisations, stakeholders and perspectives were represented.

People on the ISC were mainly recruited following observations of the review hearings. In one site, all people whose hearing was observed were invited to take part in an interview. In the other sites, pilot staff introduced the researcher to selected individuals on the ISC. Informed consent was obtained to either conduct an interview after the review or for their contact details to be shared to set up an interview at a later date. Interviews with ISC participants took place in private rooms at the court, probation or support service offices following appointments/hearings or by telephone, depending on participants' preference.⁸

Three different semi-structured topic guides were used: one for people on the ISC, one for staff and one for judges. This helped to ensure the evaluation questions were addressed

⁸ We also interviewed one individual whose sentence had been revoked online using the prison's secure system.

whilst also allowing for flexibility to respond to emerging topics and the interviewee's role and experience.

Interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and transcribed in full.

Survey of partners and wider stakeholders

The purpose of the survey was to gain input from a greater number of staff and stakeholders than would be possible through qualitative methods alone and to provide a quantifiable indication of attitudes and experiences. The survey was administered in April 2025 and largely repeated questions from an earlier survey, the results of which were covered in the interim report.

Fewer responses than originally anticipated were received, but this reflects the fact that partnerships are smaller than envisaged. A breakdown of respondent roles and organisations is provided in Tables A1.1 and A1.2 below.

Table A1.1: Which of the following best describes the organisation you work for?

Organisation	Frequency
Substance misuse treatment provider	22
HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)	20
Activity Hub	8
HM Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS)	6
Specialist women's service	6
Police	4
Housing association/other housing provider	4
Local authority	3
NHS, including liaison and diversion services	2
Restorative justice provider	2
Other	2
Total	79

Table A1.2: How have you been involved in the ISC pilot?

Respondents were able to select multiple options.

Involvement	Frequency
I was involved in developing the initial plans and processes for the ISC pilot before it launched.	13
I am involved in delivery of the ISC pilot (including providing support to participants).	62
I am a member of the Oversight Board/Strategic Board/Local Implementation Team (LIT).	12
I identify/refer potential participants to the ISC pilot.	6
The ISC pilot is relevant to my work, but I am not otherwise involved in planning or delivering the pilot.	9

Analysis of monitoring data

A monitoring metrics framework was developed by MoJ. This included administrative data from a variety of sources. This included the Effective Proposal Framework, nDelius (probation case management system) and the Offender Assessment System (OASys) as well as completed Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale questionnaires. The monitoring data reviewed as part of the evaluation included:

- Information on participants including demographics, criminogenic needs and drug use.
- Sentencing information and offence types for ISC participants.
- Proposals for ISC orders in pre-sentence reports and ISC sentence requirements.
- Contacts with the ISC, including missed appointments.
- Results of alcohol/drug testing.
- Breaches initiated for ISC participants.
- Completions/early terminations of ISC orders.

An extract of the monitoring data was created in May 2025 and covered data to the end of March 2025. Anonymised data was securely transferred to CFE Research. It should be noted that the data was extracted from live justice systems which are subject to change and therefore data may not match exactly other published reports.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the evaluation was sought and granted by The University of Greenwich Research Ethics Board.

This evaluation includes research with vulnerable people; people on the ISC have a history of multiple forms of severe disadvantage, including addiction, mental ill-health and housing insecurity. Plain English information sheets were provided to facilitate informed consent. These made clear that taking part in the evaluation was optional; participants could change their mind at any point without giving a reason and deciding not to participate would not affect their sentence or support. We checked that participants fully understood this before commencing interviews.

Topic guides and information sheets were reviewed by people with lived experience of the criminal justice system and other forms of disadvantage to ensure that the language was clear and questions appropriate. Interviews focused on participants' experiences of the pilot, the support they received and the difference it made, not their offending or personal histories. However, there was a risk that discussions could trigger memories of traumatic events. Researchers undertaking interviews with people on the ISC were experienced in interviewing vulnerable groups and were clear about the steps to take if wellbeing or safeguarding concerns arose during interviews.

All data collected was kept confidential unless a participant disclosed information suggesting potential harm to themselves or someone else. All research data was stored on secure UK-based servers. Personal information (name, contact information) was saved separately to transcripts and recordings. Access to data was restricted to members of the evaluation team and will be permanently delete three months after the completion of the evaluation.

Appendix 2

Theory of Change

