

# A new probation partnership? Working with women to improve compliance with community sentences

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## Abstract

Historically, little research had been conducted on the reasons for non-compliance with community sentences, and even less relating to female offenders. This research project focused on women subject to community sentences, to identify factors that may influence their attendance rates. The study concentrated on four areas relevant to female compliance with CROs and CPROs: consistency of officer; physical appearance of the office; characteristics of female offenders; and attitudes towards Probation/Awareness of the role of the Probation Service.

The research is based on case studies and in depth interviews with three women and their supervising probation officers.

## Findings

- The physical appearance of the office does not appear to have been significant to the women's failure to attend appointments, nor was it noted as a factor that may affect future attendance.
- Consistency of officer is significant. Sixty two percent of absence dates which led directly to a breach hearing occurred in the first three-months of the order, where weekly reporting is required and change of officer is most frequent.
- Over two-thirds (73%) of successful completions represented the women's first CRO/CPRO. Only 27% of orders imposed on women previously known to the Probation Service completed without breach proceedings being instigated. This may also be related to the length of criminal career and number of previous convictions.
- A greater number of unacceptable absences were recorded in the second year of the study, even though the number of orders imposed decreased. This may be related to the introduction of case management, and the impact of this on attendance rates/officer discretion in decisions concerning the acceptability/unacceptability of absences.
- All three women interviewed felt that factors outside of their orders impacted on attendance. It seems that attendance was not related to the consequences of non-compliance, such as breach action, court appearances, humiliation, fines etc, but was related to other issues in the women's lives which they felt could not be addressed via the Probation Service. In essence, change led to compliance, rather than compliance leading to change.

## Recommendations

There should be greater consistency in the relationship between supervising officer and offender, especially during the initial stages of the order. If women felt more secure in the relationship, they may be more likely to disclose issues that may otherwise remain hidden, for example domestic violence.

- Where partners are both subject to CRO/CPROs, supervision should remain separate. Although occasional joint appointments may be beneficial, this should be arranged at the discretion of the supervising officers and take the needs and individual circumstances of those supervised into account.
- There should be flexibility with appointment times, so childcare does not prevent attendance.
- There is a need for increased awareness amongst women subject to CRO/CPROs about the role of the Probation Service and links with other community organisations such as Refuge and Victim Support.
- There is a need for increased staff training on issues of domestic violence and other issues affecting women to raise awareness and assist them to detect potential difficulties.