

Problem-solving courts

A framework for implementation

1. Introduction

This framework is designed to help senior decision-makers develop and implement new problem-solving courts (of which the Ministry of Justice's initiative to pilot Intensive Supervision Courts (ISCs) is the latest Government-funded programme) in the adult criminal court system. Problem-solving courts are a diverse family of court models and can be found in adult criminal courts, youth courts and family courts in the United Kingdom. Their common features are that they:

- Specialise in a specific set of issues such as substance use or domestic abuse or around a specific target group, such as women at risk of custody.
- Deploy a multi-agency team/partnership to provide intervention and supervision.
- Integrate intervention and supervision with judicial monitoring, a process in which individuals are regularly brought back in front of the same judge to discuss progress and future challenges and opportunities for change.
- Endeavour to create a procedurally fair environment.
- Focus on improving outcomes.

Problem-solving courts are designed to address the underlying causes that drive offending behaviour, rather than dealing only with its symptoms. By integrating judicial oversight, multi-disciplinary supervision, and targeted services, these courts create the conditions for lasting change in participants' lives and improved outcomes. Problem-solving courts represent a shift in court practice – away from simply case processing and towards an ongoing, constructive relationship between the court, the participant, and a network of support services. This approach is intensive, evidence-led, and requires inter-disciplinary partnership working between multiple agencies.

The [international and national evidence base](#) shows that problem-solving courts can improve compliance, address underlying causes of offending, and reduce reoffending when implemented with fidelity to core principles. This framework has been produced to assist areas across the UK who are inspired to develop their own problem-solving court approaches in the adult criminal court systems of the UK.

We developed the framework to especially assist those areas keen to develop new approaches within the Ministry of Justice's Intensive Supervision Court (ISC) pilot in England and Wales. This framework is therefore particularly relevant to Mayors, Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), Welsh Government, Regional Probation Directors or Strategic Leads, and regional leaders in His Majesty's Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) in England and Wales. It may also be helpful for the non-statutory partners that are crucial to the successful implementation of problem-solving courts, such as health commissioners, women's centres and treatment providers.

We hope that any new problem-solving courts in the adult criminal justice system can be informed by over three decades of international research into problem-solving courts and by the promising practice we are seeing in their latest iteration, the ISC pilots in Liverpool, Bristol, Teesside, and Birmingham. We also wish to highlight the wider practice base in Scotland and Northern Ireland outlined in [our guide to practice across the UK](#).

The purpose of this framework is to give stakeholders in interested areas:

- A clear understanding of what constitutes a problem-solving court.
- A summary of the evidence base supporting these approaches.
- Practical steps and checklists for building the partnerships, processes, and governance needed to launch, implement and sustain a problem-solving court.

The aim is to equip local areas to prepare evidence-informed proposals and to lay the groundwork for effective delivery from day one.

2. Policy context

Intensive supervision courts

In 2023, the Ministry of Justice funded the piloting of four new problem-solving courts (dubbed Intensive Supervision Courts (ISCs)) in England and Wales. These currently operate in two forms:

- Women's ISC (Birmingham Magistrates' Court): Focused on diverting women from short custodial sentences, addressing trauma, mental health needs, substance use, social instability, and supporting the maintenance of family relationships.
- Substance Misuse ISCs (Liverpool, Bristol, Teesside Crown Courts): Targeting individuals whose drug or alcohol dependency drives repeated and persistent offending, with a view to diverting them from short custodial sentences, reducing reoffending, improving health outcomes, and increasing access to treatment services.

The [Independent Sentencing Review](#) (2025), led by David Gauke, concluded that structured, intensive interventions in the community could be more effective than repeated short custodial terms in breaking cycles of reoffending. The review recommended the Government "expand the availability of Intensive Supervision Courts to address prolific offending", building on early lessons from the pilots. In July 2025, the Lord Chancellor endorsed these recommendations, committing to scaling up ISCs as a priority. (We are aware that, in Scotland, a similar Sentencing Review is ongoing as we write.)

The current and future ISCs are underpinned by legislative changes introduced in the *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022*, which amended the *Sentencing Act 2020*. These changes enabled selected courts to:

- Attach regular court reviews to all community and suspended sentence orders.
- Allow judges to initiate breach proceedings in court reviews.
- Impose short custodial sanctions (up to 28 days, maximum three times) for non-compliance, after which participants return their ISC order.
- Impose a standalone drug testing requirement alongside or separate from a Drug Rehabilitation Requirement (DRR).

Cases in ISCs also are not subject to the reduced supervision timelines required under 'Probation Impact' in England and Wales.

Presumption to suspend short custodial sentences of 12 months or less

Following the Independent Sentencing Review, a presumption to suspend short custodial sentences of up to 12 months has been included in the Sentencing Bill, which was introduced to Parliament on 2 September 2025. This clause must pass through Parliament before reaching Royal Assent and therefore remains subject to change and will not take effect for some time. The presumption will mean that a greater proportion of custodial sentences will be suspended. If the presumption in its current form becomes law, we would expect that ISCs in magistrates' courts will primarily target those who meet the eligibility criteria and either (a) are excluded from the presumption or (b) whose custodial sentence would be suspended. Under ISC legislation, the judiciary have the power to sentence an individual to either a Community Order or Suspended Sentence Order with ISC conditions, providing options to impose an appropriate ISC sentence that encourages participation.

Other developments

There are problem-solving courts across the criminal justice systems of the United Kingdom, including women's courts and treatment courts in Scotland and in Northern Ireland. Moreover, over the past decade, the UK has seen the development of several problem-solving initiatives across different non-crime jurisdictions, including:

- **Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs):** Operating in the family courts to help parents address the issues that have brought them into proceedings in order to achieve sustainable and safe placements for children, FDACs combine judicial continuity with intensive multi-agency assessment and intervention.
- **Pathfinder Courts:** Testing new approaches to resolving private law disputes in the family courts more efficiently and effectively, with greater emphasis on problem-solving, minimising conflict and elevating the voice of the child.

These initiatives demonstrate that problem-solving principles can be adapted across court types, and that judicial leadership combined with coordinated service delivery can produce better long-term outcomes for individuals and families. With the Ministry of Justice seeking new ISC sites (see below), we have compiled this framework to assist partnerships to shape a court model around local needs and which, if endorsed, could benefit from national funding, national evaluation support, and the momentum of a growing UK movement.

Expansion of the Intensive Supervision Court models (England and Wales)

In August 2025, the Ministry of Justice launched a new expression of interest (EOI) process, locating the planned expansion of ISCs within a wider programme of reforms aimed at reducing prolific and persistent offending, cutting court backlogs, reducing the use of imprisonment for women and delivering more effective community-based sentences. The EOI window closes on 17 October 2025.

Applications are open to magistrates' and crown courts, provided they can demonstrate:

- Judicial commitment — a named judge willing to provide continuity and lead court reviews, evidenced in a vision statement.
- Strong local partnerships — active support from HMCTS, HMPPS/Probation, police, PCCs, treatment providers, and other relevant agencies such as women's centres.
- Service availability — access to the right mix of treatment, support, and supervision services for the proposed cohort.
- Cohort need — clear evidence of local levels of prolific offending, and the nature of criminogenic needs in the target group.
- Operational readiness — the capacity to implement the ISC model without undermining other court or probation functions.

The Ministry of Justice will also consider:

- The volume of eligible offenders in the local justice area.
- Court backlog levels.
- Any other pilots or initiatives in the court that might affect ISC delivery.
- The quality of the proposed multi-agency governance and evaluation arrangements.

Shortlisted areas will be notified in winter 2025, and new sites are expected to begin implementation work in winter 2025 ahead of a phased launch from spring 2026.

For commissioners and regional leaders, the EOI process is both a competitive funding opportunity and a chance to shape the local justice landscape for years to come. Selection as an ISC site brings:

- Dedicated funding for key roles such as the Court Co-ordinator and dedicated probation resource.
- Dedicated funding to support any costs associated with co-locating probation within women's centres.
- A grant for women's centres supporting the ISC to cover dedicated ISC keyworkers.
- Ongoing policy and strategic support, including free training.
- Inclusion in the national ISC evaluation, ensuring that local impact is documented and visible.

By acting now, commissioners can position their area to benefit from national investment while tailoring the model to local needs, ensuring that the court delivers measurable outcomes for both individuals and communities.

The Centre can provide areas with support in preparing their EOIs, including advice on the latest in the design of modalities, implementation and the evidence base.

3. The evidence base

The case for new problem-solving courts is supported by a substantial and growing body of evidence from the UK and other English-speaking jurisdictions. Over more than three decades, evaluations have shown that when implemented with fidelity to core principles, these courts can produce significant and lasting benefits.

Delivering better outcomes

The Centre for Justice Innovation's *Problem-solving courts: An evidence review* (2016, updated in 2019), along with more recent UK and international studies, finds that well-designed problem-solving courts can reduce reoffending, improve compliance, and deliver better health and social outcomes. Meta-analyses of comparable jurisdictions suggest reconviction rates can be lowered by 10% to 30% compared to traditional court processes, with results depending on factors such as programme integrity, target cohort, and local context. Other UK problem-solving initiatives, such as Family Drug and Alcohol Courts, have demonstrated *measurable improvements in family stability and reductions in substance use*. The Ministry of Justice's *Process Evaluation of Intensive Supervision Courts Pilot - Interim Report* (2025) offers further evidence from the current ISC models focused on substance use and women. It reports that over three-quarters of participants had not breached their order during the evaluation period, and that two-thirds of those with extensive drug use histories tested negative at review points.

Our briefing on *women's problem-solving courts* outlines that the practice is delivered in line with the evidence of what works for women, even though there have been no high-quality outcome evaluations of the model to date. Our *financial analysis* finds that the average annual cost of a women's problem-solving court placement is £11,325, compared to £13,386 for a six-month custodial sentence, and that by sending a woman through a problem-solving court instead of custody, a financial break-even point is reached after just 78 days in prison.

How problem-solving courts deliver better outcomes

The evidence base, broadly, suggests that maintaining judicial continuity, holding regular procedurally fair court reviews, and providing tailored, multi-agency support are critical to achieving better outcomes. Integrating services - linking criminal justice interventions to health, housing, and employment support - has also been shown to improve outcomes. International evidence from Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the USA reinforces the importance of targeting the right cohort (those whose offending is driven by treatable needs), procedural fairness within judicial monitoring to sustain motivation and ensuring judicial leadership both in court and in driving inter-agency cooperation. In the process evaluation of ISCs, participants frequently cited the relationship with their judge as a motivator to comply, and weekly multi-agency meetings between probation, treatment providers, and other partners were identified as essential to resolving issues quickly. These findings align with international research showing that strong judicial engagement, consistent case management, and swift, fair responses to non-compliance are central to success.

With all that said, there remains a need to specifically evaluate whether and how the current iterations of problem-solving courts in the adult criminal courts of England and Wales, the Intensive Supervision Courts, deliver changed outcomes. The planned Ministry of Justice evaluation will add to our understanding of what works.

4. Core components of a Problem-Solving Court

The way that problem-solving courts implement the principles of problem-solving differs significantly from court to court and model to model, but all of them include the following elements:

Specialisation of the court model around a target group

- **Targeting:** Problem-solving courts focus on a specific set of issues. That issue can be defined as an underlying problem (such as substance use), a form of crime (such as domestic abuse), or a type of defendant / party to proceedings (such as women). To focus on a specific issue, problem-solving courts have a set of simple targeting criteria, often brokered with and shared across a multi-agency team, that allows them to quickly identify relevant cases within the wider court caseload.

- **Specialised assessment:** Problem-solving courts use their own assessment capabilities or adapt existing tools to more specifically diagnose the risks, needs, and assets of their target groups.
- **Specialised court proceedings:** Problem-solving courts ensure that the cases are heard in specialised settings. Specialised settings can include specially trained court professionals who understand the needs, risks, and assets of the target group and who hear the cases in dedicated sittings. Most problem-solving courts do this within existing court buildings and often in court rooms.

Key tip: In the Birmingham ISC, participants are assessed by key workers in the women's centres using the Women's Risk Needs Assessment (WRNA) tool, a comprehensive gender-responsive risk, needs and strengths assessment designed specifically to be used with criminal justice involved women.

Multi-agency intervention and supervision

- **Evidence-led programming:** Problem-solving courts utilise a menu of programmes and interventions to tackle the root causes of the problems underpinning the reason for being in court, with a focus on addressing criminogenic needs, while recognising a person's agency in moving towards desistance. A significant deal of attention is devoted to developing/using programming that is evidence-based and to focus on problems that are treatable and solvable within the legal time frames. Gender- and trauma-informed approaches, as well as practices and interventions that are tailored for cultural sensitivity, should be used where appropriate. For example, the Centre's work on [substance treatment for women](#) offers key insights into [commissioning gender-responsive treatment](#) services.
- **Coordinated case management:** Problem-solving courts have coordinators that manage the contributions of multiple agencies. They ensure information is available to the court on compliance. In some courts, this is done through dedicated teams, and coordination is led through the judge at pre-court collaborative meetings. Co-ordinators can also play a supervision and support role, monitoring and motivating the individual through their sentence plan.

Key tip: Build in co-location of staff where possible to improve communication and engagement. The MoJ provided funding to the Women's ISC pilot to cover the costs of co-locating probation within women's centres.

Accountability through judicial monitoring

- **Regular judicial monitoring:** Problem-solving courts utilise the authority of the court to monitor progress and compliance. They bring people back to court regularly and in front of the same sentencer. Sentencers use sanctions and rewards to motivate compliance and, if necessary, can hear breach proceedings. Judicial monitoring can take place prior to a plea or finding of guilt (e.g. monitoring a domestic abuse protection order), and before sentence (pre-sentence models) or after sentence (post-sentence models).
- **Using recognition, incentives, and sanctions:** Problem-solving courts have a structured regime of recognition, incentives, and sanctions that they use in monitoring. These ought to be applied swiftly following changes in compliance. Recognition can include simple things such as congratulating progress publicly in court to more formal recognition, such as graduation ceremonies. Incentives can range from shortening community orders and sealing criminal convictions to suspending a prison sentence in return for compliance with a community sentence. These types of incentives are sometimes also called 'legal leverage'. Sanctions can cover minor punishments such as a day of community service up to the imposition of short custodial spells, prior to return to the programme.
- **Communicating recognition, incentives, and sanctions:** Problem-solving courts clearly communicate the regime of recognition, incentives, and sanctions at the start of a person's orders and throughout their supervision and monitoring. This clear communication emphasises the rules and expectations of the court and places the onus on the agency of the defendant to comply with them.

Key tip: International evidence shows incentives and sanctions are most effective when they are swift, responsive, and proportionate – delayed or inconsistent responses reduce their impact.

A procedurally fair environment

- **Clear understanding:** Problem-solving courts make efforts to clearly explain the court and non-court processes, the options available, and the consequences of actions and decisions at the start of, during and at the end of the case.
- **Respectful treatment:** Problem-solving courts, where the frequency of contact between judge and participant is more regular, emphasise that all those engaged in the process treat each other with respect, upholding the worth, autonomy, and dignity of each individual.
- **Neutrality:** Problem-solving courts emphasise that decisions are made and seen to be made with impartiality, transparency, and neutrality. The frequency of contact between the judges and the participant, unlike in regular court, builds this perception over time.
- **Voice:** Problem-solving courts involve participants in the process and make sure they feel that they have a voice that is listened to, one which has agency in the interventions they receive and the decisions that are made.
- **Physical environments:** In order to provide a more procedurally fair environment, especially for judicial monitoring court reviews, many problem-solving courts encourage better dialogue between the judge(s) and the participants through changes like using courtrooms where everyone is on the same level or dispensing with robes and wigs.

Key tip: In the ISCs, regular reviews, typically held monthly but which may be reduced in frequency at the judge's discretion as compliance improves, are seen as central to sustaining engagement.

A focus on outcomes

- **Monitoring outcomes:** Problem-solving courts use systematic data collection and analysis to measure the impact that they have on the people and communities they work with. They seek to monitor both reoffending and changes in underlying levels of criminogenic need. Data is used to help improve day-to-day practice, informing elements such as assessments, sentencing decisions, and courtroom communications.
- **Using evidence to inform innovation:** Monitoring data is used alongside other sources of evidence - including the perspectives of participants and other stakeholders - to inform a process of reflection and innovation. Evidence is used to improve existing services, to identify where new services might be useful and, in some cases, to inform decisions to bring a project to an end.

5. Partnerships

Successful problem-solving courts require support within a broader partnership of agencies and services, which should include:

- **Judiciary:** A committed and specially trained judge (or small pool of judges) who lead court reviews and champion the model. Judicial continuity is critical.
- **The Court Service:** The courts play a crucial role in both the administration of problem-solving courts and in setting the court environment for participants. In particular, the role of the court co-ordinator is vital—they are responsible for scheduling and listing cases, and for liaising closely with the multi-disciplinary team and the judge(s).
- **Probation Service/Justice Social Work Services (Scotland):** Lead the supervision, manage orders, prepare pre-sentence reports, and coordinate case management with other services.
- **Police:** Support enforcement, data sharing, and wider community safety alignment.
- **Treatment Providers:** Deliver substance use, alcohol, and/or mental health services with capacity to meet the intensity of orders.

- **Defence Lawyers:** Vital for ensuring participants recognise what they are consenting to and for promoting engagement with problem-solving courts where it is in the best interests of their client;
- **Women's Centres and Specialist Support Services:** Provide gender- and trauma-informed support.
- **Housing, Employment, Health and Education Services:** Address the broader social factors contributing to offending.
- **Victim Support Services:** Ensure victim safety and voice are considered.
- **Activity Hubs:** Provide bespoke opportunities for individuals to access and undertake activities that would be considered as pro-social and purposeful.

These partnerships can benefit from a purposeful approach to local governance and strategic oversight, including:

- **Governance:** A multi-agency strategic board to oversee performance, resolve operational issues, and steer local adaptations. Integration with wider community safety, Public Health, and criminal justice strategies and partnership boards.
- **Shared vision:** All agencies commit to the same outcomes — reduced reoffending, improved wellbeing, and safer communities.
- **Clear roles and responsibilities:** Each partner knows what they are accountable for, documented in a written partnership agreement / memorandum of understanding. Clear accountability lines between operational teams and commissioning bodies.
- **Regular communication:** Regular operational meetings and monthly or quarterly strategic boards to monitor progress and resolve issues.
- **Data sharing protocols:** Legal, secure arrangements that allow timely exchange of relevant information.
- **Mutual trust:** Built through transparency, reliability, and regular joint problem-solving.

Some of the most successful problem-solving courts actively involve agencies and groups outside the core justice system:

- **Local Authorities:** Housing, adult and children's social services, and Public Health functions are often crucial to addressing underlying needs.
- **Integrated Care Boards (ICBs)/Local Health Commissioners:** Responsible for local mental health service provision and primary health care, such as GPs, that are key to supporting people to address their unmet needs.
- **Voluntary Sector Organisations:** Provide flexible, person-centred support that statutory services may not offer.
- **Lived Experience Experts:** Former participants or peer mentors can build trust and model change.
- **Department for Work and Pensions:** Colleagues from the local JobCentre Plus can be a source of support for providing support with employment, education and training, and support in areas such as CV writing and benefits claims.

6. National approval process for England and Wales

No new problem-solving court — whether an ISC or another initiative — can operate within the adult criminal court system of England and Wales without national authorisation. Areas seeking to develop a new problem-solving court in the adult criminal courts must apply for ISC status via the [expression of interest](#) process.

Following submission of EOIs, national approval of successful ISCs will be made by:

- The Ministry of Justice, who will assess operational readiness, local need, and alignment with national objectives, with final sign off from the Deputy Prime Minister.
- The Senior Presiding Judge (SPJ) or their delegate, who ultimately decides whether a problem-solving court proposal can move from concept stage to implementation.

To inform this process, leaders from across the criminal justice sector, including HMCTS and HMPPS, will be consulted to ensure that areas have sufficient capacity and the right operational set-up to deliver an ISC.

Once approved, new ISCs will be enabled (via secondary legislation) to use legislative provisions only available to designated pilot sites. Amendments to the Sentencing Act 2020, introduced by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (2022), enables these courts to introduce additional powers for ISC-managed Community Orders and Suspended Sentence Orders. Specifically, the new measures to be trialled within the ISC pilots are:

- a) The ability to impose standalone drug testing requirements as part of a Suspended Sentence Order or Community Order in instances where the individual does not meet the conditions for a Drug Rehabilitation Requirement (DRR), or where it is deemed suitable to have a combination of both the DRR and the drug testing requirement (e.g. to facilitate continued drug testing after the DRR has ended);
- b) The ability to attach reviews to all Community Orders and Suspended Sentence Orders, which can be increased or decreased in frequency in response to the individual's compliance and progress;
- c) The ability for a judge to initiate breach hearings in a court review where the court deems that the individual has breached their order;
- d) The ability to impose a short custodial sanction for up to 28 days, a maximum of three times over the course of the order, for non-compliance.

Cases in ISCs also are not subject to the reduced supervision timelines required under 'Probation Impact' in England and Wales.

7. Designing Your Problem-Solving Court Model

Designing an effective problem-solving court means translating the core components into a model that fits your local context while meeting national requirements.

Research into the setup of problem-solving courts consistently emphasises the set-up phase as crucial for setting a culture of collaboration. Multi-agency workshops and regular meetings are important in the development and early implementation stages to ensure buy-in, build relationships and resolve teething problems

Step 1: Assess local need

- Use local data to identify the scale and nature of the problem: levels of prolific offending, prevalence of substance use, or particular vulnerabilities (e.g. women who offend).
- Map trends in sentencing, custody rates and breaches of community orders.
- Identify gaps in current service provision that the court could address.

Step 2: Define your target cohort

- Be specific about who the court aims to work with, so numbers are manageable and services are capable of delivery, while allowing for a degree of professional judgement about eligible cases.

- Be wary of net-widening— there is considerable evidence that dragging people who would otherwise receive a standalone community sentence or a court fine into a problem-solving court is likely to be more harmful than helpful, even when it is done with the best of intentions.
- Consider sub-cohorts of your target group which may have specific needs (e.g. women with dependent children, individuals with dual diagnosis, cultural sensitivities).
- Align eligibility and exclusion criteria with national standards (if available).

Step 3: Map and mobilise services

- Catalogue existing treatment, housing, education, and employment services.
- Identify capacity gaps and negotiate how they will be filled.
- Secure service-level agreements to ensure timely, prioritised access for participants.

Step 4: Co-design court processes

- Work with the judiciary, court service, and probation to agree how cases will be identified, referred, and reviewed.
- Set the frequency of court reviews and the process for applying incentives and sanctions.
- Develop templates for pre-sentence reports, review reports, and data collection.

Step 5: Co-design the multi-agency supervision and interventions

- Work with the judiciary, court service, and probation to agree what enforceable requirements participants are likely to receive as part of the model.
- Work with the probation and service providers to agree what services participants are likely to receive as part of the model and what and how participants will be judged on things like compliance and what element of these services are enforceable.
- Be wary of over-dosing— compliance is a non-linear process and there is considerable evidence that providing too many requirements and services to participants can be both overwhelming and can also set participants up to fail by asking too much too quickly, even when it is done with the best of intentions.

Step 6: Resource and build the model

- Budget for a dedicated court coordinator and additional probation capacity.
- Where the cohort of the court dictates, allocate funding for additional service provision from a range of partners, not least women's centres and treatment (including mental health) and victim services providers.
- Plan for ongoing training for all partners.
- Build in flexible funds (e.g. travel support, emergency housing) to remove barriers to compliance. For ISC pilots, this is supported through the ISC fund, which is designed to cover core enablers such as travel.
- Establish an operational group that meets regularly (often prior to judicial monitoring court reviews) to discuss potential participants and those in the programme.

Step 7: Embed governance and evaluation

- To support implementation each site must designate a local lead to support the convening of partners and schedule task and finish groups to support the development of ISC processes. Local sites should determine

who is best placed to take on this role, drawing on networks and local knowledge. HMPPS leads will provide support to these task and finish groups ensuring that the ISC policy can be effectively operationalised.

- ISC sites to convene weekly partnership meetings for the purpose of discussing upcoming cases for PSR and sentenced ISC cases for review and any exceptional case discussions. Chaired by the Court Co-ordinator and ISC Senior Probation Officer.
- Establish a strategic board from the outset to oversee the project. These boards should report into Local Criminal Justice Boards to ensure ongoing local commitment and buy-in from stakeholders.
- Nominate a data lead to liaise with the existing national evaluation team.
- Agree key performance indicators that measure both outputs (e.g. attendance rates) and outcomes (e.g. reoffending reduction, health improvement). Qualitative feedback from participants and stakeholders is crucial for understanding how the court is operating. This should be built into data collection processes.

8. Practical Implementation Tips

Designing your problem-solving court model is only the start – effective implementation will determine whether the court delivers real outcomes.

Start with a clear theory of change

- Map out how your activities (e.g. regular judicial reviews, targeted treatment) will lead to the desired outcomes (e.g. reduced reoffending, improved wellbeing).
- Use this to keep all partners focused on the same goals, and as a reference when adapting processes.

Build the court culture early

- Judicial demeanour and the tone of reviews set the culture. Invest in joint training for judges, probation officers, and service providers.
- Ensure legal representatives/solicitors are aware of the new problem-solving court.
- The Centre for Justice Innovation has a number of templates that courts can use and adapt to help them explain the new problem-solving court to partners.
- The Centre for Justice Innovation offers a two-day training programme for problem-solving court teams and judges, covering core principles, communication techniques, and practical implementation skills.
- We also run national and thematic networks for problem-solving court practitioners, enabling regular practice sharing and peer support between sites ([CJI Networks](#)).

Prioritise early identification and fast-track referrals

- Develop screening tools with probation and police to flag potential participants as early as possible.
- Aim for minimal delay between identification and first court review to sustain momentum.

Resource the court co-ordinator role

- The Court Co-ordinator is the operational linchpin, ensuring cases are listed correctly, agencies are in the loop, and follow-ups happen.
- Choose someone with relationship-building skills and the authority to resolve day-to-day issues.

Make multi-agency meetings work

- Keep operational meetings frequent short and focused on case progress and problem-solving.
- Use secure digital platforms to share and update information in real time.
- Ensure victim services are included as part of the multi-agency partnership, especially in cases where victims' safety, engagement, or access to support may be affected by the problem-solving court process.

Apply sanctions and incentives consistently

- Agree a shared sanctions and incentives framework in advance.
- Communicate these sanctions and incentives clearly and consistently to participants.
- Respond to both compliance and non-compliance quickly — research shows delays weaken the effect.

Embed participant and victim voices

- Involve participants in designing aspects of the court process (e.g. review format).
- Seek input from victim services on how to keep victims informed and supported throughout a participant's problem-solving journey.
- Develop clear comms/information sheets for victims explaining what a new court is and their rights under the victim's code.
- Use feedback forms or informal check-ins to understand what supports engagement for both participants and victims.

Plan for sustainability from day one

- Align PSC processes with existing local strategies (e.g. reducing reoffending plans, health and wellbeing strategies).
- Identify potential funding sources for when initial Ministry of Justice funding ends. This will likely involve making the local case for investment and is why the ability to measure local impact, cost benefits and qualitative feedback is imperative to sustainability.
- Ensuring that your PSC is a regular part of the Local Criminal Justice Board's agenda can help ensure ongoing commitment from stakeholders and partners.

Keep caseloads manageable

- Start with a small, clearly defined cohort.
- Avoid overloading court and probation resources before processes are bedded in.
- Expand capacity gradually, informed by performance data.
- Probation managers should recognise the risk of vicarious trauma due to the intensity and complex nature of case management and support for this cohort. The interim evaluation noted staff turnover and absences (such as long-term sickness) which can be a problem to the pilot model resilience.

Key tip: FDACs include a clinical lead within their core team. Typically providing 0.2 FTE provision, they specifically focus on staff supervision and formulation. This is in recognition of the nature of the work that deals with cumulative adversities and trauma. Clinical provision of this nature could be considered within ISCs.

Conclusion

The expansion of Intensive Supervision Courts (ISCs) in England and Wales presents a significant opportunity for local justice areas to adopt a proven, evidence-based approach to tackling prolific and persistent offending. Drawing on lessons from the current ISC pilots, wider UK problem-solving initiatives, and over three decades of international research, this framework provides commissioners and court leaders with a practical roadmap from initial concept to operational delivery. Success, however, will depend on more than just good intentions. It requires:

- National support/permission from Government and senior judiciary.
- Strong local partnerships that are willing to commit time, resources, and leadership.
- Mapping local need and service capacity and adjusting national policy directives to local circumstances.
- Rigorous design and implementation, underpinned by training, practice-sharing, and ongoing evaluation.
- Sustainability planning from day one, to ensure the court continues to deliver after pilot funding ends.

With the right planning, partnerships, and commitment, your problem-solving court can be a flagship example of justice done differently — one that changes lives, reduces crime, and strengthens public confidence in the courts.

APPENDIX 1

Court Co-ordinator Role Job Description

The Ministry of Justice is currently piloting Intensive Supervision Courts (ISCs), aimed at testing innovative and 'problem-solving' approaches to manage particular cohorts of offenders, by diverting them away from short custodial sentences and into enhanced community-based sentences, in order to achieve higher levels of rehabilitation and reduce reoffending rates.

The Court Co-ordinator will oversee the functioning of the ISC pilot, providing support to the ISC partnership team and participants, and maintaining effective communication between the operational team and the project team (Ministry of Justice HQ). Court Co-ordinators are a key component of an ISC approach and, they will liaise between the court and the supervision team, ensuring the smooth running of processes associated with the ISC pilot including co-ordination amongst all those involved, overseeing internal and external communications, gathering and sharing data with the MoJ HQ-based project team, coordinating evaluation activity and tracking and supporting ongoing learning and development needs of staff linked to the ISC, amongst any other tasks identified.

Role and responsibilities

Project Delivery:

- Ensuring delivery of project plan within sites, supporting implementation of the pilot as well as 'live' delivery
- Monitoring and reporting on progress of project, including holding meetings with key delivery partners to discuss implementation progress
- Providing effective management of risk areas
- Generate effective solutions to complex issues and dependencies across agencies
- Monitor, compile and report case progression and performance data, enabling robust evaluation, and effective liaison with the ISC Project Manager and analysts.

Case Management:

- Oversee and support weekly joint case management meetings with Probation Service, Substance Misuse providers and other members of the ISC Partnership as appropriate

Operational:

- Identify and track progress of cases from point of charge
- Maintain accurate records of live ISC cases and documentation for the programme
- Schedule court sessions and staff meetings
- Manage cases into appropriate court lists
- Attend ISC court reviews including sentence, review and breach
- Chair pre-review meetings with key delivery partners for each ISC participant
- Actively generate opportunities for improvement of services and interventions
- Maintain close contact with Probation and Prison Service when ISC participants undertake a 'short custodial sanction' to ensure interruption of rehabilitation via ISC order is minimised

Engagement:

- Building positive and effective relationships with all stakeholders
- Being the point of contact for the judiciary and all justice partners for the ISC process
- Promoting and facilitating engagement with stakeholders including the judiciary
- Ensuring effective communication between ISC partners through developing communication strategies

Governance:

- Co-ordination of all local ISC stakeholders including chairing / secretariat for regular steering group meetings with ISC judges and ISC Team to discuss implementation progress and challenges, data sharing/ reporting requirements, visits etc.
- Provide weekly/fortnightly updates to the MoJ HQ ISC project team as to the uptake of the ISC pilot, progress, key issues for decisions
- Share ISC participant court case records for evaluation purposes

Essential skills and experience:

- Good organisational skills and understanding of project management
- Organisational change skills
- Experience in working effectively within and across the Criminal Justice System
- Experience of working within a Court setting / providing services to Court
- Excellent administration and organisational skills
- Confident and experienced in convening and collaborating with a range of stakeholders at all levels
- Strong relationship-building skills to be able to form positive working relationship with key delivery partners
- Computer literate and with a willingness to learn and use organisational databases to record and extract information

Desirable skills:

- Experience in supporting people who are vulnerable and / or have substance misuse issues
- Experience of trauma-informed responses
- Demonstrable awareness and understanding of how various factors/criminogenic needs contribute to offending behaviour such as substance misuse, mental health, and trauma

APPENDIX 2

Site Testimonials

Below are testimonials from the Senior Probation Officer and Court Co-ordinator at each site, which should give some insight into how they have found running an ISC.

Women's ISC

“First thing I would say is it is very rewarding but very hard work and emotional for all involved.

1. Check your numbers, go over previous years and see how many people would have been suitable for ISC assessment just to give you some guidance on numbers. When we started, we underestimated the volume that would fall into the perimeters that had been set. We had to change these so only females at risk of custody would be assessed. The build up at first started steady but grew suddenly so be prepared for waves which we had a few.
2. Have a set day for sentencing court so CPS, Defence Solicitors all know. We did talks/training with CPS, defence Solicitors, Judiciary this helped and made everyone aware of the perimeters which was set and if they were suitable for ISC. We worked very closely with Police so they bailed into the ISC court, they were given the court number so they could bail to that court on the sentencing day. This has been very successful, but we still check the court lists each week, checking for any cases that have been missed. We have gatekeeping Judges to refer cases to if they appear in remand and appear suitable for ISC. If a Judge is not available the case would be listed into the next Thursday ISC sentencing court.
3. For the reviews, we managed to source some additional courtrooms in the family court. The courtrooms are set up in a relaxed way, so the women don't feel intimidated and are able to talk to the Judge in an open and honest environment, away from the sentencing court. I would recommend you think about how you want the review courts to work. Stability is one of the main important things for the females. We try to have the same clerk, and the Co-Ordinator is always there. The females get to know you and if they have any queries or just want a chat, they feel comfortable enough to do this as they are used to you.
4. Think ahead and be proactive to see when you need to increase the review court. I usually think about 3 months ahead as courtroom availability is limited.
5. One of the most important things is to make sure your women's centres are prepared for the volume of numbers that might come through and that they have room for growing numbers this includes Probation staff and professionals (Treatment Providers etc) working with the females as everything is co-located in the women's centres.
6. Ensure that staff wellbeing is taken into account as the role is fast-paced, can be harrowing (vicarious trauma) and often chaotic! But we love the fast-paced nature of it all and that's why we do this.
7. The Co-Ordinator role is vital within the pilot. You work with all the partnership, understand when problems arise and react to solve them as soon as possible. You are the link to judiciary, and this allows for smoother and quicker response to any issues. Working closely with the partnership so everyone knows that you are approachable and will try and assist with anything required. You are the pin that holds it all together.
8. The partnership working between all agencies is of vital importance, building relationships, understanding everyone's area of expertise and having a common goal to improve outcomes for women, so they can access the wrap around support throughout the order.
9. To see the progress made by the ISC women from their first meeting in the sentencing court to each review is amazing. Seeing them start to open up and want to talk to the Judge about how they are doing, demonstrating how they have grown in confidence and starting to look forward to the future makes all the hard work worth it. Everyone involved in the ISC must want to work to make this possible and truly believe in the benefits of working in a very different approach.”

Substance Misuse ISC 1

“The key to the success of the ISC is the close working relationship between the probation officer, treatment workers, judiciary & court co-ordinator. In contrast to DRR reviews, there is much more engagement & regular feedback, often outside of the review hearings. One of the challenges is that Judges have to respond swiftly to queries regarding breaches & amendments to orders & the quick turnaround of screening requests, alongside their usual court duties.

Timings for review hearings can often change at short notice depending on court lists & other judicial obligations & a degree of flexibility is appreciated by all participants, including the participants.

At the start of the ISC journey, participants are often nervous & not used to the informal nature of the review hearings. In most cases, seeing their confidence grow throughout the duration of the order & the frank conversations they are able to have with their designated Judge is different to any other order.

Knowing that we have all played a part in helping towards their eventual recovery & making positive changes to their lifestyle is a rewarding experience, often not observed in normal court proceedings.

There are a few differences between managing the ISC team and the business as usual (BAU) approach to sentence management within Probation. Effective partnership and multi-agency collaboration, alongside timely and appropriate information sharing between local services, are essential to ensuring the ISC team operates efficiently.

We hold a weekly multi-agency meeting, inviting relevant services to discuss the current caseload, highlight any concerns or emerging priorities, and review new cases under consideration. This forum enables timely referrals and allows us to quickly gather critical information to support informed risk management decisions. Maintaining strong, collaborative relationships with local services has been fundamental to the team's success.

Judicial involvement is a central component of the ISC model. Judges oversee the duration of the order and are often able to establish trusting, constructive relationships with individuals on the cohort. This rapport can play a significant role in motivating individuals to pursue and sustain positive change. From my perspective, this close collaboration has enhanced understanding between Probation practitioners and the judiciary—something that is less readily achieved through standard BAU practices.

As part of a pilot initiative, our team has embraced a trial-and-error approach, maintaining flexibility and openness to adapt as needed. Recognising that what works in one area may not necessarily translate directly to another, we have tailored processes to better fit the needs for our local team. Regular communication between Probation, the courts, and treatment providers—combined with ongoing reviews of what is working well and where adjustments are needed—has been instrumental in building an effective, collaborative team and delivering a successful approach for all stakeholders.”

Substance Misuse ISC 2

“The Intensive Supervision Court (ISC) pilot was launched in June 2023. From its inception, the ISC team has played a key role in shaping the strategic direction and implementation of this bold and innovative approach to sentence management. From the earliest stages, the ISC team has embraced a creative and collaborative model of integrated service delivery. This model was designed to meet the needs of government, the public, and individuals subject to an ISC order. Our team work diligently to develop a local operational framework that aligns with our area's unique demographics. The Ministry of Justice granted each ISC site autonomy to deliver a bespoke operational model. In our area, this flexibility has enabled the development of strong, effective partnerships with police, judiciary, and support services involved in sentence management of ISC cases.

So far, we have seen significant success locally across multiple domains, including, reduction in reoffending, addressing drug misuse, safeguarding the public and supporting individuals to make meaningful lifestyle changes. Over the past 2 years the team have achieved notable positive outcomes such as, attainment of qualifications and employment, sustained drug abstinence, repaired family relationships and engagement with restorative justice. These outcomes reflect the transformative potential of the ISC model and its ability to support individuals in making lasting, positive changes.

The ISC pilot stands as a testament to the power of innovation, collaboration, and localised service delivery in criminal justice reform. Its success demonstrates the value of tailored interventions and sets a strong foundation for future expansion and policy development.”

Substance Misuse ISC 3

“Working within the ISC has been the best experience. There have been bumps in the road as with any pilot, but these bumps have helped us learn along the way. Working closely with the Judges and all the partners involved with an individual from PSR to sentence through to recovery is such a privilege to be able to observe.

It has not been without its challenges. As the name would suggest, it is intensive for all those involved with each case. This can take its toll on resource and can be at times quite mentally challenging as it is impossible not to become so invested with the people we work so closely with, especially if their motivation dips.

One of the main initial hurdles was getting everyone used to a new way of working and getting the balance right of rehabilitative vs. punitive. It is so unusual that an order involves an all-encompassing, close-knit network of treatment, probation, police and judiciary. But having that information sharing at your fingertips proves vital to the success of the ISC, allowing us to efficiently and effectively deal with the challenges an individual is facing. It is important that we all understand the pressures each agency is under and through consistent communication, consistently working together and team workshops to keep us fresh, it has just become the norm now.

It is such a pleasure to see the relationships form and grow between the individual on the order and all those supporting them. Watching their walls come down as they get to know the judge who is there encouraging them every step of the way and not just there to punish them is incredible to watch. Everyone's journey is different and through having such varying expertise involved, it means we can adapt to their needs which is so important. Seeing people turn their lives around is both equally rewarding and inspiring.”

“As the Probation lead within my area, I have enjoyed working within the ISC pilot. Whilst it comes with its challenges, this is something which I thrive on, as it allows me to work collaboratively with various stakeholders and agencies. Being able to work closely with the Courts, Judges and the ISC partnership has allowed for effective collaboration, sharing our knowledge and expertise with one another, whilst learning from one another in such a unique environment.

The experience of working within the ISC has been incredibly rewarding, not only on a professional level but also personally. For staff, it provides an opportunity to be part of something innovative, where every day we see the direct impact of our work in supporting individuals on their journey toward rehabilitation. The sense of shared purpose across agencies – Probation, the Judiciary and Court staff, treatment providers, and other partners – fosters a culture of teamwork that is both motivating and inspiring.

The Court reviews are a particularly enjoyable and valuable aspect of this role. To witness individuals, engage openly with Judges and staff, and to see their progress recognised in such a positive and structured way, is something that reinforces the importance of the ISC model. These reviews not only provide accountability but also create space for encouragement, reflection, and support, which can be pivotal for those striving to make meaningful change in their lives.

Being part of such a fantastic project is a privilege. The ISC represents more than just a process – it embodies a commitment to promoting rehabilitation, reducing harm, and ultimately reducing reoffending. It brings together expertise from across the criminal justice system and beyond, with an approach that ensures individuals are supported in a way that is both proportionate and compassionate.

The impact is clear: improved outcomes for participants, stronger relationships between agencies, and a real sense that we are contributing to safer communities. To play a role in this work, alongside such committed colleagues and partners, is deeply fulfilling. I truly believe that projects like the ISC not only improve the lives of those who come through our doors but also strengthen the very fabric of how justice and rehabilitation can be delivered in the future.”

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About the Centre for Justice Innovation:

The Centre for Justice Innovation seek to build a justice system which all of its citizens believe is fair and effective. We champion practice innovation and evidence-led policy reform in the UK's justice systems. We are a registered UK charity.

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