

WORKING PAPER 7
September 2025



Diversion in the West Midlands: A critical case study

by Tom McNeil



**CENTRE FOR CRIME
AND JUSTICE STUDIES**

WORKING PAPER

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Acknowledgements

In recognition of all the police officers, staff and the many statutory and third sector people working hard for a fairer justice system.

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Introduction

With a policing reform White Paper expected from the government later this year, questions around the proper purpose of policing will return to the spotlight. It will no doubt be an opportunity, justifiably, for certain policing leaders to make their views known; not unlike what we saw recently from the Met Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley, who is keen to emphasise that police officers should not be expected to become “social workers”. This all comes at a time of considerable national reflection on the justice system, including our approach to sentencing, criminal courts and violence against women and girls.

It therefore gives me cause to reflect on some of the key challenges I experienced with organisational change and cultural reform in policing, from my time as Assistant Police and Crime Commissioner for the West Midlands from 2021-2024. Some of my experiences were very positive, and they present optimism for how we enable ambitious justice reform agendas, including reducing imprisonment and reoffending through high quality community rehabilitation. In this paper, I therefore discuss the West Midlands and its difficulties with maximising the use of diversion and out-of-court disposals (OOCd). This is because it serves as an important case study for critically assessing how we implement change in both policing and effective alternatives to custody at a time of systemic reform.

What is community rehabilitation?

The world of alternatives to custody can be a complex beast, filled with acronyms and people talking at cross purposes. One person's OOCd is another's diversion programme, sometimes arising from formal statutory powers like conditional cautions to more informal diversionary arrangements and partnerships. A court-ordered community sentence is one person's early intervention and another's punitive justice for having missed pre-arrest opportunities. For advocates of more incarceration alternatives, there is generally, however, a consensus on the imperative of high-quality community rehabilitation offers that seek to tackle the underlying drivers of offending. The recommendations for significantly more community sentencing, arising from ex-Justice Secretary David Gauke's *Independent Sentencing Review* in the UK, puts community rehabilitative initiatives firmly in the limelight (Ministry of Justice, 2025). While court-ordered community sentences are clearly distinct from the police's discretionary power to use OOCds, it still highlights the contemporary importance of looking closely at the mechanisms for non-custodial rehabilitation practice.

Whether looking at multi-disciplinary substance misuse and mental health support in communities, tailored therapeutic interventions for certain groups like women's centre diversion, rehabilitation accommodation or restorative justice (Latimer *et al.*, 2005; Kennedy *et al.*, 2018; Hayhurst *et al.*, 2019; Bernard *et al.*, 2020), the evidence-base is mixed.

Variations in the level of experience or professionalism of practitioners is a typical concern. Insufficient resourcing can leave programmes struggling to cope with the volume or complexity of the people they are there to support.

Randomised control trial standards of evidence are extremely difficult to arrange due to limited funding, the ethics of control groups and persistent gaps in data quality. The geographical variation in strength of frontline partnerships between agencies and the third sector can render initiatives too narrow or incomplete in the problems they aim to address. For instance, a youth diversion effort through weekly mentoring may well struggle to reduce reoffending if it fails to simultaneously address child neglect or abuse in the home through statutory social care partnerships. All this means it is difficult to 'copy and paste' evidenced-led initiatives, or establish them at all; a common theme when it comes to replication (Losel, 2017).

Further, while some schemes are one-dimensional, such as an education package for those found in possession of drugs, others are more sophisticated and provide more multi-disciplinary support to tackle a range of needs, from homelessness to ill-health and trauma. In my experience, most schemes are only designed or resourced to address one aspect of offending, like substance misuse. They therefore miss out on the greater potential of more holistic interventions like those seen in family court reforms. Evidence has found multi-disciplinary family drug and alcohol courts to be far more effective and economically efficient in tackling complex social problems for families in crisis (Papaioannou *et al.*, 2023; Centre for Justice Innovation and Mutual Ventures, 2024). However, even if not always meeting the gold standard conditions of 'the best evidence', many programmes and efforts do have compelling stories to tell. They are often backed up by both qualitative and quantitative measures of success, although often lack sufficient sample sizes, control groups and reliable data measures.

Despite this, for some leaders in law enforcement, pragmatism comes first. In this, they do not let perfection be the enemy of the good; not when they witness social problems that are best addressed through non-punitive means. They therefore frequently fund, design and pursue packages of preventative and rehabilitative work in the community; deciding the lack of cast-iron proof of 'what works' should not stand in the way of a well-reasoned solution. Their pragmatism is arguably well-founded. First, this is because there is a good degree of evidence across the board that a broad range of community initiatives can be effective (Crest Advisory, 2022), including being more effective than prison (Summers *et al.*, 2024; Abramovaite *et al.*, 2019) and blunt punishment. Also, it is because the evidence around the ineffectiveness of prison and the economic impact of that strategy is so stark (Marsh and Cox, 2008), that 'doing nothing different' and 'accepting the status quo' is risky in its own right.

Challenges in the West Midlands

For those criminal justice leaders embracing non-custodial solutions, such as certain police and crime commissioners, one might expect that their suite of rehabilitative programmes would simply start yielding results. The funding should be made, the commissioned service start, the relevant partners take immediate note, agencies make seamless referrals and the positive outcomes unfold. Sadly, my experiences, as Assistant Commissioner tasked with supporting the elected Commissioner hold the Chief Constable to account, shows a more complex picture. Let me explain.

First, let us consider the West Midlands context. Through a mix of national government funding, local

statutory partnerships, third sector delivery organisations and funders and occasionally private philanthropy, a suite of evidence-led rehabilitation programmes were in place. Most of them still are. As outlined in the Appendix, this includes:

- specialist women's diversion;
- a complex addiction community programme;
- a lower level domestic abuse perpetrator initiative;
- restorative justice;
- low level drug possession diversion;
- stalking prevention scheme; and
- brand new and less proven youth diversion schemes, alongside other efforts aimed at issues like drug addiction.

At strategic boards, senior police officers at all levels, including chief officers, expressed support for a number of these initiatives. I believe that was genuine. One of the most successful programmes was initiated and led by dynamic police officers. It managed to support prolific shoplifters escape decade-long addictions to crack cocaine and heroin, marked by tearful awards ceremonies and changed lives (Chiverton, 2023). There seemed little opposition to the principle of the programmes from any other agencies, and mostly there was internal support for maintaining their funding. That support was not always evident. On some occasions, for instance, Police Federation representatives (the officer representation body) calling for an abandonment of 'soft on crime' approaches perceived as being imposed on frontline officers.

I should be crystal clear here: I have the utmost respect for police officers. I witnessed how the overwhelming majority were passionate, hardworking and reflective; sacrificing much, including health (Brewin *et al.*, 2022), to work in a profession that is wedged between multiple political and societal tensions. It is why I spent a short time as a Special Constable (a voluntary officer in London), and why I enjoyed working with the police at the strategic level.

Police officers are often expected to ameliorate other social failings, and without much economic reward for doing so. Of course, they had their challenges, and the effective adoption of the diversion strategy was one of them. Despite positive news report after news report (Chiverton, 2023), and affirmations in open strategic board meetings, referral numbers for nearly all schemes remained low, often dipping to new depths, or ebbing and flowing at levels that left commissioned services under capacity. This further risked a perpetuating spiral where commissioners doubted the importance of such schemes, and in turn sometimes threatened to cut funding; potentially derailing years of slow progress.

This was not true for all schemes, such as diversion for low-level drug possession, which was very successful in terms of referrals. However, this represented low-hanging fruit in terms of process and complexity of the individuals' needs – the referral mechanism immediately took it off the officer's books – and the scheme ran a basic education session for attendees on the law and health implications of illicit substance use. Requests of chief

officers to raise awareness of the suite of schemes among frontline officers and local chief officers were normally favourably received, but did not move the dial. Challenge on poor referral rates, at meetings designed to hold the Chief Constable to account, seemed to disappear into the ether. Hyper-local partnership convening efforts went nowhere, as overstretched officers felt forced to prioritise other functions or simply did not have the authority, energy, training or permission to pursue anything innovative.

Larger well-organised partnership events to raise awareness of the impact of services like restorative justice, again often resulted in dead ends. No real efforts were made to cultivate new partnerships, prove its value and help people see the opportunities with their own eyes. Local policing leaders and dynamic policing figures, moved around frequently. This normally meant the little awareness of such schemes disappeared with them. Meetings to inform frontline officers were often met with blank faces: it had not been made part of their job, and my mentioning certain schemes on my visits was often the first time they had heard of them. It is not surprising that on returning to their mounting caseloads, nothing was actioned as a result.

In the Commissioner's office, there was also a level of conflict over the degree to which senior leaders felt we should be helping cultivate partnerships to improve referrals, or whether we should leave it all to the commissioned service. I firmly believed a major part of the Commissioner's role is about systems leadership, but the effort and exhaustion involved was seen as unpalatable to those who preferred a purer accountability function. My view is that asking a few pointed questions at a strategic board no one pays attention to, is very ineffective on its own.

Diversion successes

Towards the end of my time at the Commissioner's office, however, the situation improved. Having initially started as the strategic adviser to the previous Commissioner, I had spent seven years trying to politely nudge different policing leaders on diversion through the various governance mechanisms in place – locally and centrally – in a friendly way and, at times, more robustly. Realising that was failing, I and some colleagues put together what we believed was a comprehensive plan to address the various barriers and inertia we witnessed. Based on significantly rising police referral numbers alone, it appeared to work, and quickly. I am therefore going to outline the measures we proposed here, in the hope that it might offer some value for others working in or with the police and other relevant partners.

Before I do, I note that the success in increasing the number of referrals lies with the Chief Constable and his colleagues. In my view they stepped up to the task and succeeded where others failed. Indeed, the speed of their improvement perhaps highlights mostly the failure of those tasked with oversight – a failure to articulate what they felt was needed – or to persuasively communicate the evidence and shared benefits for policing colleagues who have a route to tackle the revolving door of reoffending.

Of course, I do not dare paint a rosy picture. Certain services, such as New Chance for women and CARA for low

level domestic abuse, all of a sudden became oversubscribed, creating a capacity crisis. For New Chance, the increased referrals effectively required double the number of caseworkers to cope with demand (Anawim Birmingham's Centre for Women, 2025).

Then there is the fact that a few changed policing leaders, and a loss of institutional memory at any one of the multiple levels involved in policing and partnership organisations, could see any of this progress dropped in an instant. Further, accessing accurate data on a police force's use of community rehabilitation or progress on this agenda, is extremely difficult. Pre-arrest or pre-prosecution diversion is often not recorded reliably, or valued by local and national oversight functions. This needs to change. Geographical disparities within a large force area can give a poor picture overall even if certain areas are exceeding. Brilliant practice in one area might be having a noticeable impact when compared to current standard practice in the UK, but be the subject of a problematic postcode lottery or be tied to strong but transitory policing leaders.

Looking at a 'crime resolution tracker' (Transform Justice, 2025), while West Midlands Police were using community solutions only 24 per cent of the time in 2021, their progress has been stuck at around 30-33 per cent between 2022-2024. This does still of course mark a notable increase. Notwithstanding the arguably modest community solution rate, this case study of rapidly increasing referrals for certain programmes represents a real opportunity. Unfortunately, the data demonstrating this progress is not made readily available.

A standout example can however be gleaned from data presented by women's centre Anawim regarding the New Chance project at one of the Commissioner's public strategic board meeting. This showed an increase from 35 referrals in the first quarter of 2023-2024, to 174 referrals in the first quarter of 2024-2025, following significant month-on-month rises across the whole of the West Midlands (Anawim Birmingham's Centre for Women, 2025). That is almost a 400 per cent increase in quarterly referral rates. Having been Assistant Commissioner at the time, I can talk confidently to the fact referral numbers like this went up for other schemes too, including CARA. First, this shows it is possible to successfully work with the police to shift their emphasis on effective use of community rehabilitation, defined broadly as noted at the start of this article. While the community outcomes will not perfectly reflect that increase due to all the challenges noted above, this should ultimately mean lower reoffending, less victimisation, better life conditions for those committing crime and reduced economic costs for the state. Secondly, the fact this development can happen at pace, should offer governments more confidence in exploring the reallocation of prison budgets for alternatives, for those people who are best supported safely in the community. That again underscores the opportunities in the UK at least, presented by the Independent Sentencing Review, in light of the country having the highest imprisonment rate in the EU by far (Ministry of Justice, 2025).

I therefore learned that a truly concerted effort was required to ensure frontline officers consider the diversion options available to them, on a consistent basis. We also need to address head on, that good intentions alone will not translate into operational priorities. Enthusiasm for reform can easily be characterised as some distant idealistic future. Consequentially, it can fall foul of short-term priorities based on enforcement statistics and government pressures. Equally, winning the support of the police needs to come with a recognition of the

immense pressure police officers and staff are under (Solar and Smith, 2020; Parkes *et al.*, 2021), and a case must be made for the mutual benefits diversion brings. We also need to recognise when efforts like this are not a priority for certain chief officers, or even ideological opposition. Here, we must consider the levers available to shift culture. Further, when progress is made, vigilance is required, due to the constant churn of police officers and renewed government mandates and firefighting. Celebrating the success of police leaders might also help, but can sometimes be omitted from the playbook by those 'holding to account'.

Policy recommendations

While what I outline below cannot be attributed with precision to the increase in West Midlands Police referrals to a number of schemes – including New Chance for women, CARA for domestic abuse perpetrators and restorative justice – a plan incorporating these recommendations was presented to chief officers and appeared to influence a major operational shift. The following policy recommendations therefore reflect the measures we put to the Chief Constable in seeking a step-change in the use of existing diversionary programmes. Not all were implemented to my knowledge, but I suggest they serve as a plausible roadmap for implementing a fuller programme of community rehabilitation.

1. The Police and Crime Commissioner's Offices or Deputy Mayors for Policing and Crime should call for a formal direction from the Chief Constable regarding their commitment to diversion. This should be accompanied by appointing a lead chief officer. In doing so, the applicable force can seek to position itself as a leader on embracing effective justice reform. In particular, the Chief Constable should be encouraged to release a formal direction internally so police officers at all levels ensure they are utilising all available opportunities to refer individuals to diversionary schemes and programmes. With a dynamic Chief, things can happen quickly.
2. Police officer performance should be assessed in part based on their effective use of referrals to diversionary programmes. Where evidence-led schemes exist, and when referral rates are low, questions should be asked about the performance of the relevant officers.
3. Referral numbers and evidence of consistent and widespread planning around diversion options, should be incorporated into police officer performance management structures. This is to ensure diversion schemes are genuinely embedded into practice, and should include the establishment of a formal internal governance structure for diversion and community rehabilitation specifically. Done well, this would ensure local policing commanders come together to share details around performance, intel, best practice, concerns over diversion efficacy when arising and identify challenges to effective delivery. Such boards should not get hung up on the distinctions between the legal mechanisms of such schemes, but ensure they have a grasp of the avenues available in the round (e.g. whether voluntary, conditional or otherwise), and proactively identify gaps in the system.
4. Forces should establish 'more local' governance structure as well, to ensure the strategy around diversion does not remain too remote from frontline officers. Reporting across structures should include detail on how various

- diversion programmes are being used including information on demographics, crime types and decision-making.
5. Forces should develop real-time data insights dashboards for diversion (again, defined broadly), to ensure a consistent data profile including on any demographic disparities. Done properly, this could transform the responsiveness of the police's approach to community rehabilitation, including dips in performance. Likewise, it could address any postcode lotteries or disparities, like West Midlands Police has done when looking at stop and search statistics.
 6. The Crime Commissioner's Office should establish a specific governance structure to oversee the performance of these efforts, with regular reporting to the Commissioner's strategic board. This should ensure cross-cutting themes are discussed on the many partnership bodies in existence including those focussed on violence reduction, combating drugs and violence against women and girls. Tackling the very real silos between these partnership efforts is an eternal challenge, and we should be discussing community rehabilitation programmes at each one.
 7. A commitment should be required for ensuring high-quality handover processes for incoming officers. While this could seem like an insultingly adjacent point, the high turnover of police officers through promotion or rotation, demands that more meaningful efforts are needed to ensure institutional memory around referral routes and diversion opportunities are retained. Progress can so easily unwind, without a concerted effort to maintain what has been built.
 8. Commitments should be sought to reform administrative processes, to make it easier for police officers to make referrals, and remove any unintended consequences for them. One example might be to avoid punishing officers that proactively refer to suitable schemes that place conditions on individuals. For some schemes, it might appear on police systems that officers have lots of 'open' caseloads, when in reality they are making rational decisions to divert someone to help. Technological solutions could help make referrals within communities easier. 'Apps' however are unlikely to be a silver bullet without the other measures to ensure a truly determined effort on awareness raising or reliable evidence-led referral routes.
 9. Budget incentives or drivers should be on the table. Ultimately, policing budgets could be top-sliced if it was felt more direct ownership of diversion was necessary, should the police not take appropriate action. Of course, the best outcome is a shared vision between the Commissioner's Office and the Chief Constable.
 10. Longer term, a more strategic approach is required to new recruits, onboarding and training of officers, to embed a culture of knowledge and application of evidence-led diversionary routes. The curriculum of the professional policing degree presents an opportunity for incorporating the importance of diversion to institute practice change. A collaboration with the UK's College of Policing presents an avenue here, not least because discussions around the curriculum can sometimes be fiercely guarded.
 11. Exploring technological opportunities for supporting effective frontline decision making in applying OOCs should be a priority (Slothower, 2014), subject of course to high ethical scrutiny (Sorell, 2024).

Conclusion

To restate, I cannot ultimately conclude that the plan outlined above was what shifted the performance and higher referrals from West Midlands Police. Indeed, since having left the Commissioner's Office, I cannot see evidence that all or even most of the proposed actions have followed through. That is not necessarily a criticism, but just an honest perspective on how the priorities may now differ. Likewise, there appears to be limited publication on the statistics around such schemes in the West Midlands, and such data collection and transparency could represent effective and ambitious leadership on wider reform in the UK and beyond. Of course, most efforts involve many parties, which makes attribution very challenging and so pinning too much stock on the plan outlined, is unreliable. However, it was unequivocally the case that referrals did increase consequentially when I was Assistant Commissioner. As I note, urgent conversations were needed to address certain diversion services going over capacity as a result.

In conclusion, this analysis cannot be said to be an empirical contribution to the discussion on the use of community rehabilitation within the West Midlands or wider. It does however offer a qualitative and policy proposition on some of the steps that could be taken to work with forces to enhance their performance on community rehabilitation. Further research into this case study, based on qualitative analysis of actual operational changes and interviews with chief officers and local commanders, could be powerful. More interrogation of data around referrals against certain schemes is also essential, and would help build an evidenced assessment of the approach advocated here. Of course, the agenda would also be supported by a raft of new and high-quality academic inquiry into the effectiveness of diversion programmes.

The potential impact of getting this agenda right is huge. Prison can break up families, cause homelessness, be the start of long-term unemployment, and end up being a carousel of long-term reoffending. Conversely, evidence-led community solutions can go towards tackling the drivers of crime, thereby reducing victimisation, pressures on law enforcement and the economic impact of a failing justice system.

Appendix: West Midlands Diversionary Programmes

The table below provides a short overview of the key diversion programmes in the West Midlands, referenced above.

West Midlands Diversionary Programmes

Diversion Type	Description	Reference
Specialist women's diversion	'New Chance' is a holistic OOC led by women's centres for female offenders, offering one-to-one support, group work and advocacy with other agencies to advise and support women based on their needs.	(Abramovaite <i>et al.</i> , 2020)
A complex addiction community programme	'Offending to Recovery' (formerly 'Offender to Rehab') supports those committing prolific retail crime in connection with substance addiction, connecting them with drug and alcohol support including residential rehab, rather than prosecution.	(Aptus, 2022)
A lower level domestic abuse perpetrator initiative	'CARA' is an early intervention 'behaviour change' course for those committing lower level and medium risk domestic abuse crime, aimed at emerging first or second time offenders using cognitive behavioural therapy-based motivational interviewing.	(Christie <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
Restorative justice	Professionally convened restorative justice conferences for those willing to participate, to enable victims to meet the perpetrators of crime to find resolution and closure for victims, and aid the restoration of the person committing the crime.	See: https://www.westmidlands-pcc.gov.uk/victims/for-victims/restorative-justice/
Low level drug possession diversion	The 'DIVERT' scheme means that the majority of those found in small amount of possession of any drugs for personal use are given a community resolution if they attend a two-part educational and harm reduction course.	(Stevens <i>et al.</i> , 2023)
Stalking prevention scheme	The 'Early Awareness Stalking Intervention' provides six sessions with a specially trained forensic psychologist to perpetrators of stalking as part of an OOC. It also supports victims and investigating officers through a stalking triage clinic.	(Jerath and Page, 2023)
Brand new and less proven youth diversion schemes, alongside other efforts aimed at issues like drug addiction	For example, a youth activities diversion scheme whereby young people committing crime for the first time receive peer support with both arts/sports activities and a restorative component.	See: https://t2a.org.uk/2023/07/27/peer-hearing-community-interventions-by-and-for-young-adults/

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September 2025

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