

# **IOM IN WALES AFTER THE REFRESH:**

## **PRACTITIONER VIEWS OF INTEGRATED OFFENDER MANAGEMENT**

### **Executive Summary**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The main aim of this study was to explore the views and experiences of probation and police officers working in Integrated Offender Management (IOM) in Wales at local level in 2023. The initial plan was to examine the effects of the ‘National Refresh’ of 2021, a set of reforms following a critical Joint Inspectorates’ report. These sought to strengthen IOM governance and create more consistency between areas, introducing tighter rules on the selection of participants, more accurate data recording, and a number of performance measures. However, as the study progressed it was expanded to include a wider range of topics related to local practice. It was based on interviews with 23 managers and frontline practitioners from across Wales. Although the sample covered a good range of ages and experience, it was relatively small and not randomised, so the results cannot be assumed to be representative of the total staff complement.

The following sections first summarise our findings regarding interviewees’ views about IOM in general, then their comments about specific aspects of IOM policy and operational practice, including changes introduced by the Refresh. This is followed by an overview of staff perceptions of participants’ responses to and engagement with IOM, and finally a summary of the key messages that seem to emerge from the research.

## **GENERAL VIEWS OF IOM AND THE REFRESH**

Overall, the findings were very positive. The great majority of interviewees were enthusiastic about IOM in general, and broadly satisfied with the changes brought about by the Refresh.

The features of IOM most frequently highlighted as key to its effectiveness were close partnership working and timely sharing of information. These, it was said, enabled both police and probation to be more rapidly aware of, to better understand and to respond more effectively to emerging issues of concern, in many cases by acting jointly or in a co-ordinated fashion. Co-location of police and probation teams was said to be particularly valuable in enabling this.

Probation interviewees also emphasised that IOM gave them more time, space and opportunity than standard supervision to be flexible and creative in their work with service users, increasing the chances of getting them to ‘engage’.

The main advantage of the Refresh was said to be the greater clarity it had given to the aims and priorities of IOM, while the ‘Fixed, Flex, Free’ (FFF) system had brought more consistency between areas in the selection of participants and in basic expectations of how supervision should be structured at local level. It was also noted that the changes had been accompanied by increased interest in IOM from national politicians and civil servants, as well as important increases in funding. At the same time, a few probation practitioners expressed a concern that the heavy demands placed upon those in the Fixed category were particularly difficult for some groups and individuals to meet, and hence risked ‘setting them up to fail’.

## **OPERATIONAL PRACTICE**

### ***Local management***

The local management arrangements in IOM whereby, even in fully co-located offices, police and probation staff working in the same team are line-managed separately (usually by a

Sergeant and a Senior Probation Officer, respectively), were widely agreed to work well. This was said to be the case even when (as was quite common) one of the managers was based elsewhere, distant from the frontline staff. The general picture painted was that the two managers kept in close and frequent communication ('joined at the hip', as one put it) and that, although disagreements sometimes arose about what course of action to take, these were usually resolved quickly and amicably through discussion. It was said to be rare to escalate disagreements to higher level managers, although this option was available if needed.

At the same time, several interviewees agreed that it was fair to characterise some local teams as 'police dominated' and others as 'probation dominated': this could be partly due to where the team and the managers were located, which agency had more personnel and resources allocated to IOM, local working practices and cultures which had grown up over time, and/or the individual personalities of managers.

### ***Co-location***

As stated above, it was emphasised that a key facilitating factor for effective IOM work was some form of co-location, which helped police and probation staff get to know each other well and develop working relationships based on mutual trust and respect. Co-location was most commonly described by interviewees as taking a part-time (or 'hybrid') form, whereby, for example, members of one agency worked in the other's offices on an afternoon or two a week. (The IOM Programme Manager also estimated in early 2024 that about 40% of local teams were 'fully located' and 50% 'partly co-located'.) Most agreed that both forms of co-location were effective, although in a few cases it was pointed out that the attendance rate of the visiting team members was not always good.

While at least part-time co-location of police and probation staff was common, it was relatively unusual for staff from other agencies also to share the IOM offices. This was one of the developments that interviewees said they would most like to see, making the premises more like a multi-agency 'hub'.

Most areas had a Wales Integrated Serious and Dangerous Offender Management (WISDOM) team, in some cases based separately from the 'generic' IOM team, but more often sharing offices with them. In some areas, too, staff supervised both WISDOM and non-WISDOM cases. However, as offenders supervised under WISDOM were assessed as high risk of harm, they were generally dealt with by more experienced or specially trained police and probation practitioners, who tended to work particularly closely together. This sometimes led them to be regarded (and to see themselves) as a totally separate unit. Indeed, we found a degree of confusion among interviewees, some of whom did not know that WISDOM is part of IOM and that its cases are strictly speaking IOM cases in the 'Free' category.

Overall, then, co-location (whether full or partial) was regarded as one of the most effective elements of IOM – a judgement shared by the senior managers we interviewed, one of whom said that active efforts were currently being made to expand its use. At the same time, it was acknowledged that co-location was particularly difficult to set up in rural areas.

### ***The Fixed, Flex, Free system***

The Fixed, Flex Free (FFF) system, which was probably the most prominent change introduced under the Refresh, was broadly welcomed by our interviewees, although a small number raised concerns about aspects of it.

Its main advantage was said to be the relatively clear structure it gave to IOM work, following a period in which there had been major differences between local teams in the kinds of people selected for supervision and how the work was undertaken. Practitioners said that as a group they now had a better understanding of the aims of the partnership work, the kinds of people they should focus on, and how they should go about it.

At the same time, we were surprised to still find some misunderstanding of the FFF system. While most interviewees were clear about the criteria for inclusion in the Fixed cohort, several – including managers - admitted to some confusion around the Flex and the Free categories.

More importantly, some concerns were expressed about the inclusion (mainly in the Flex category) of people for whom the relatively onerous conditions of supervision under IOM could be counter-productive. In particular, it was asserted that the decision to place all ‘Y2A’ cases (people transitioning from the youth to adult systems) under IOM supervision for at least three months, although partly intended to ensure they get access to welfare services, was not necessary for those without a background of serious or persistent criminality and could result in ‘net widening’ due to sanctions for non-compliance.

Another concern raised by a small number of interviewees was that some people on IOM were also supervised or monitored under other specialist arrangements such as MAPPA or sex offender units – again with a risk of ‘overkill’ as well as unnecessary duplication.

Finally, the point was made by some local supervisory staff that, although the FFF system made good sense on paper, in practice the size and composition of the cohorts it produced did not always fit well with the available staff resources, skills and experience.

### ***Contacts and visits***

National operational guidelines state that it is good practice for the Fixed cohort to be offered three contacts per week. This is generally treated as a minimum requirement: appointments offered and kept are used as performance indicators, and sanctions applied for failure to keep them. It was said that at times when participants needed extra support or their behaviour was giving cause for concern, this number could be greatly exceeded. When they were thought not to need intensive work or numerous office appointments, efforts were often made to achieve the required number of contacts in a less demanding way, for example through home visits or meetings in public places, meetings with partner agencies, telephone or internet discussions, and so on. Such contacts – even many of those conducted by the police – were said to be ‘gentler’ or ‘lighter’ in intensity and less focused on offending behaviour than office meetings.

As one might expect, some individuals in the Free category, especially those supervised as WISDOM cases, received especially frequent and intensive contact due to concerns about risk. At the other end of the scale, care was taken not to ‘overburden’ some of the younger participants, with whom engagement was generally more difficult to achieve, and whose lifestyles did not fit easily with frequent office visits.

Finally, it was emphasised by interviewees from both agencies that although a strong focus of IOM police officers’ attention was inevitably on whether participants were committing new offences, some were also often very active in terms of helping them to access services, make and keep appointments, and indeed to engage them in serious conversations about efforts to

‘turn their lives around’. In some cases it was claimed, this had helped to counteract long-held hostile views about the police and led to more productive relationships

### ***Provision of services***

One of the original ideas behind IOM was that the participants would gain priority access to support, such as housing, substance misuse or mental health services, to meet their needs, thereby increasing their chances of rehabilitation as well as enhancing compliance and engagement with supervisors. However, this is not a statutory duty or normally written into contracts, and the extent to which it occurs appears to vary widely. In some areas, close relationships between IOM staff and local service providers (strengthened by part-time co-location or regular multi-agency meetings) were said to have persuaded providers that responding quickly to the needs of people on IOM could have major benefits. In others, however, it was reported that they were rarely treated any differently to other clients; this was mentioned most often in relation to mental health services.

As noted in the previous section, many examples were also given of police officers working in IOM going out of their way to assist or act as advocates for individuals to get quicker access to services.

### ***Interventions***

Although high risk and prolific offenders (such as the majority of those on IOM) are very much the target of accredited programmes, most interviewees reported that they rarely refer their supervisees to such intensive interventions. This is because they feel that there is a high risk of them re-offending or being breached either when waiting for the programme to begin or during its delivery. Instead, several expressed a preference for adapting existing programmes and shorter interventions to create their own versions for one-to-one delivery. Others argued that formal interventions were often not attractive to IOM participants, and that they responded better to fairly simple activities outside the office environment – for example, hill walks or fishing trips – during which it was easier to develop a trusting relationship and persuade them to engage in more intensive work at opportune times.

### ***Compliance and breach***

Perhaps the area of IOM work most likely to see significant disagreement between police and probation partners is that of how to respond to participants’ failure to comply with conditions, or to concerns or evidence that they are committing new offences. The general picture painted by interviewees was that police officers tended to be more inclined to argue for strong action, including breach and prosecution, while probation OMs were more often prepared to be flexible and consider alternative approaches – as one put it, practitioners from the two organisations had essentially different ‘mindsets’. However, it was also clear that this is too simplistic a picture. We were given examples of police officers going out of their way to persuade colleagues or courts to adopt a more lenient approach, on the grounds that breach or another short prison sentence would undo progress an individual had made and that avoiding recall was sometimes the better longer term strategy.

The above discussion also illustrates a more general point emerging from our research, that flexibility and willingness to consider non-standard approaches appear to have become distinguishing features of IOM work, to some extent encouraged and supported by managers from both services working in tandem.

## **DATA AND PERFORMANCE**

Some interviewees commented about improvements post-Refresh in the quality of data about IOM in Wales, as well as the introduction of elements of performance measurement.

It was pointed out that the previous state of statistical information about IOM had been very poor, with many areas not even able to provide accurate data on the numbers of cases under active supervision, let alone the problems that people on IOM had presented with and how these had been met. Post-Refresh, wholesale ‘culls’ of records were undertaken to remove old cases and produce more consistent and complete records of active cases. A ‘Dashboard’ has also been developed allowing quick access to detailed information about the demography and needs of the IOM population in any selected area. Although these developments were widely praised, it was also pointed out that the two main sources of information about individuals – the police Niche system and Probation’s Delius – remain separate and cannot talk to each other, leading to some delays in data sharing between the services. It was argued by some that the long-term solution was a dedicated IOM system accessible to all relevant staff .

In addition, managers generally welcomed the advent of performance indicators for IOM, noting that they were not experienced either as oppressive or as time-consuming to collect data for. However, it was pointed out that some of the targets – particularly those on housing and employment – had been set unrealistically high, and furthermore that they were more a reflection of socio-economic conditions in each area rather than of actions undertaken by IOM.

## **SERVICE USER RESPONSES AND ENGAGEMENT**

We did not interview people on IOM, so can only report what staff said about their responses to supervision. The general message from the interviews was that responses varied greatly, ranging from welcoming the extra attention that comes with IOM to sullen rejection and refusal to engage.

Broadly speaking, older people were said to be more likely than younger people to respond positively. Indeed, examples were given of persistent offenders who had been on probation many times without seriously engaging, but who developed close and trusting relationships with both probation and police OMs as a result of the frequent contact and variety of activities that IOM entailed.

On the other hand, many supervisees, especially younger ones, were said to find the extra obligations burdensome and responded negatively. Indeed, certain groups – including homeless people, those with serious substance misuse problems, and young people with gang connections – were mentioned as likely to prove particularly difficult to engage. Moreover, it was recognised that people who have had frequent contact with the criminal justice system, whatever their age or offending history, are unlikely to react positively to the news that they will be partly supervised by a police officer.

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Interviewees mentioned a number of strategies used to try to overcome these challenges. First, as noted above, efforts were made to keep standard probation office appointments to a minimum, with contacts and visits being conducted by a variety of professionals in a variety of ways outside the office. Regarding specific ‘hard to engage’ groups, it was said for example that IOM links with drugs workers and services could be used to ‘lure’ substance misusers into



attending, and that some areas were piloting the use of a specially trained group of OMs to work with young people with gang connections. More generally, IOM staff were encouraged to respond to people as individuals, getting to know more about their ordinary lives and interests, and meeting other family members. Once again, flexibility seems to emerge as a key element of their approach.

Finally, the problem of hostility to the notion of supervision by the police was said to be ameliorated partly by efforts on the part of the officers to get to know people on IOM as individuals, as well as by demonstrating that they were prepared to go out of their way to offer practical help. Examples were given of people whose views had been modified by simple acts of kindness such as being given a lift home or helped with access to some form of welfare.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The ‘headline’ messages that emerge from our research can be summarised as:

1. The great majority of local managers and staff interviewed had very positive views of IOM in general, and were broadly satisfied with the changes brought about by the Refresh.
2. The features of IOM most often highlighted as key to its effectiveness were close partnership working and timely sharing of information, leading to quicker and more effective responses to emerging problems or concerns. Co-location (whether full-time or part-time) was seen as particularly valuable in this regard.
3. IOM gave probation practitioners more time and opportunity than generic work to adopt a flexible, individualised approach to supervision, allowing them to be more creative and innovative in efforts to engage service users and in the design of interventions and activities. This was said to increase the chances of developing positive relationships with the many people on IOM who had a history of poor engagement with authority. Police officers, too, often found creative ways of overcoming initial hostility.
4. It was also reported that more flexibility tended to be applied in response to failures to comply with conditions. Often, both probation and police managers took part in discussions as to what action to take, and although the latter generally took a ‘harder’ line, examples were also given of police officers advocating against breaching or prosecuting particular participants (even, on occasion, when minor offences were involved) in order to avoid undermining progress that individuals had made.
5. The FFF system of cohort selection and supervision was largely welcomed. It was seen as striking a reasonable central-local balance, producing greater consistency between areas while still allowing discretion to reflect local priorities. However, some confusion remained about the rules governing the Flex and Free systems.
6. Some service users – particularly younger people in Fixed cohorts - found the demands of IOM supervision very difficult to meet, placing them at risk of return to custody even if they were not offending. Although staff often reduced the risk by exercising discretion or finding less demanding ways of achieving required contact levels, some interviewees felt that the resulting breach rates remained too high.

7. In some areas, close relationships (strengthened by regular communication at multi-agency meetings) between IOM teams and welfare agencies result in IOM participants receiving accelerated access to services. This can act as a strong 'carrot' for them to engage constructively with supervisors. Elsewhere however, despite the efforts of IOM staff, they are not given any form of priority by other agencies, meaning that potentially key benefits of the IOM system may be lost.
8. Rural areas experience a number of significant challenges, including travel problems for both staff and service users, which are increased by the additional contact requirements associated with IOM. They also tend to have different crime patterns - and hence different priorities - from urban areas, leading some teams to feel that the FFF system is not best suited to their local circumstances.
9. Interviewees, especially managers, welcomed improvements in the completeness and accuracy of IOM data recording that had accompanied the Refresh. This included the introduction of performance indicators, which were not generally regarded as burdensome or intimidating. However, some questioned the value of comparing measures of employment and housing between areas, as they were more likely to reflect local socio-economic conditions than the results of activity by IOM teams.
10. Based on staff perceptions (we did not interview participants), the overall picture that emerges of service users' responses to IOM is very mixed, ranging from hostility to strong engagement. It was reported that younger people, the homeless, and those with substance misuse problems were often the most resistant or difficult to engage, while older people (including some with a history of hostility to authority) tended to respond more favourably to the extra attention and assistance. However, attitudes were also said to be dynamic, with positive changes over time quite common as participants got to know their supervisors (both probation and police) better 'as people'.

Overall, we conclude that IOM is in a much healthier state than it was pre-Refresh, particularly in terms of funding and staff resources, clarity of purpose and expected ways of working, and quality of information about its activities and outcomes.

We also conclude that, given the value attached by interviewees to co-location, its expansion deserves to be treated as a priority. This might include inviting more agencies to join police and probation in co-located offices, which was also seen as very beneficial. At the same time, we recognise that co-location of any kind can be particularly challenging in rural areas.

Finally, more thought could be given to the concern that some participants find it difficult to cope with the heavy demands of IOM and face enhanced risk of breach for non-compliance. It may be that, rather than requiring three contacts per week from all in the Fixed cohort, local teams should be advised to review cases at intervals to decide whether three contacts remains the optimum requirement for particular individuals, taking into account risk, needs, responses to supervision, progress towards rehabilitation, and difficulties in attending appointments.

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