



Her Majesty's
Inspectorate of
Probation

Building the evidence base for high-quality probation services: The role of probation providers

HM Inspectorate of Probation

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HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. Our *Research & Analysis Bulletins* are aimed at all those with an interest in the quality of these services, presenting key findings to assist with informed debate and help drive improvement where it is required. The findings are used within HM Inspectorate of Probation to develop our inspection programmes, guidance and position statements.

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Executive summary

Context

It is beneficial to all that probation services are grounded in reliable and robust evidence, for which investment in high-quality research studies and evaluations is essential. Such studies underpin an evidence-informed and evidence-based approach, assisting with developments in policy and improvements in delivery, maximising positive outcomes for service users. In this bulletin, we focus upon the role of probation providers in both developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality services.

Approach

The findings presented in the bulletin are based upon three stages of research:

- (i) a review of providers' publications and key documents
- (ii) an online survey to all probation providers
- (iii) targeted interviews with provider research leads and external researchers working with providers.

Key findings and implications

- The overall level of research activities undertaken by probation providers over recent years has been disappointing. Within the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms, the requirements for providers to engage in evaluation and research were left loosely defined, and it is clear that any focus on research activities has been hindered by resource constraints and the financial difficulties reported by a number of providers.
- Interviewees told us that some research projects proved unfeasible due to the inability to arrange access to the necessary data, staff and/or service users. Responsible officers have been stretched and often had little time to dedicate to supporting research. In relation to data within case management systems, interviewees reported that it was common to find too many gaps, restricting its value for analysis.
- Resource constraints also limited the attention given to research findings, with interviewees highlighting that it was difficult to fully engage with leaders and key stakeholders. It was common to find no clear mechanisms built into structures to learn from and use research findings.
- While the overall picture of research and evaluation activities is disappointing, there have been exceptions and positive examples of collaborative working, with strong interpersonal relationships, and the use of differing forms of dissemination and communication.
- Summer 2021 will see further significant reforms to the probation delivery model. Based upon the findings in this paper, we set out the following five key requirements:
 - *Embed an evaluation culture:* There needs to be a much stronger commitment to building a research/evidence-based culture, hardwired into organisational-wide delivery models. A shift is required, whereby supporting, co-producing or instigating research is recognised as a key part of working in probation, with clear links to professional learning, development and even career

progression. An appetite to embrace and learn from research findings which are both negative and positive is also required.

- *Identify the critical evidence gaps:* Research resources need to be maximised, requiring a strategic, joined-up and holistic approach to monitoring research activities, identifying the most critical evidence gaps, and considering which questions can be answered in the short, medium and longer term, and who may be well placed to answer them.
- *Tailor the research methods:* Research questions will vary markedly in nature, and a wide range of research methods are required, with a recognition that differing approaches can be highly complementary. There is room for action-based research, in-depth case study work and longer-term experimental designs, as well as newer innovative methods, for example, visual methods in data collection.
- *Support internal and external researchers:* Those undertaking research projects, whether internal staff or external researchers, need to be sufficiently supported. This involves much more than financial resource, requiring the time of senior staff and engaged gatekeepers who can facilitate the necessary access. Establishment of a research community or forum would be beneficial, so that researchers can share good practice, resources, learning and expertise.
- *Focus on dissemination, engagement and impact:* For evidence to be used, impacting upon policy and practice, it needs to be reported in clear and accessible ways. A range of dissemination and communication methods should be used, with a focus on ensuring meaningful engagement and interaction, further embedding an evaluation culture and collaborative working.

1. Introduction

'An effective probation service values knowledge and the ability to use knowledge.'

Effective organisations are based upon the intelligence to transform information into ideas... The research into "What Works" offers probation services the opportunity to use information to improve effectiveness. This requires evaluation, research and a commitment to evidence-based practice.'

Chapman and Hough (1998)

This statement is taken from *Evidence Based Practice: A Guide to Effective Practice*, which was produced on behalf of the Inspectorate just before the turn of the century.¹ While recognising that there had been significant advances in probation research, it was acknowledged that there remained much to learn: 'The last two decades have seen a substantial increase in the quantity and quality of probation research. We now have a much better and more balanced view about what works – and what doesn't – in tackling offending behaviour. However, the knowledge base remains limited in many respects.'² There had been a particularly strong focus in developing the evidence base in the USA and Canada, and while there was much to learn from the international evidence, it could not be assumed that the findings and conclusions applied equally to England and Wales.

Over the last two decades, the development of the evidence base gathered pace. We saw continuing 'what works' research, building upon the research in the 1990s, with a focus upon the effectiveness of programmes. At the same time, there was a growth in 'desistance' research, which focused more on individual lives and personal stories rather than aggregated outcomes (Maruna and Mann, 2019). Within probation areas in the 1990s and early 2000s, research and information officers were responsible for evaluation evidence and monitoring outcomes – although there was a shift over time from evaluation to providing performance management data. There was also a forum to share research and information ideas and to promote professional development – the National Probation Research and Information Exchange (NPRIE).

Significant change took place in 2014, through *Transforming Rehabilitation*, when the 35 self-governing probation trusts were replaced by a new public sector National Probation Service (NPS), with seven divisions, and 21 new privately owned Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs).³ Alongside these reforms, the Ministry of Justice published a summary of the evidence on reducing reoffending, concluding as follows: 'While evidence in some areas is of good or sufficient quality to demonstrate an impact on reoffending, the summary has

¹ The guide was produced alongside *Strategies for Effective Offender Supervision*, which summarised the findings of the Inspectorate's 'What Works' project, pulling together the available UK and international evidence about the impact of the work of probation services.

² The potential for progress had been highlighted in 1970 by Roger Hood and Richard Sparks in their classic *Key Issues in Criminology* textbook, where they noted that research into the effectiveness of treatments to prevent recidivism was 'limited and rudimentary', but helpful advances in research methodology meant that the stage was set for considerably more research to extend the knowledge base.

³ The NPS advises courts on sentencing all offenders, and retains those offenders who present a high or very high risk of serious harm or who are managed under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). CRCs supervise most other offenders presenting a low or medium risk of serious harm – these cases are allocated to them post-sentence by the NPS.

also demonstrated that many gaps exist in our evidence base. Some of these gaps are more critical than others' (MoJ, 2014).

The *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms were in part intended to encourage probation providers to innovate in the services they delivered and to introduce new interventions, particularly through the new Rehabilitation Activity Requirement.⁴ These developments heightened the need for research and evaluation, and a commitment to evidence-informed and evidence-based practice.

Key definitions

Evidence-informed approaches are those which are guided by the best available research and practice knowledge, and which are underpinned by a clear theory of change. While this leaves room for innovation, there should be a commitment to evaluation.

Once validated through robust evaluation, specific approaches and interventions can then be described as **evidence based**.

Evaluation is an objective process of understanding how a policy, service or intervention is being implemented or delivered, what effects it is having, for whom, how and why. There are three main types of evaluation: process, impact and economic evaluations.

Research is broader than evaluation, going beyond checking the efficacy and (cost) effectiveness of existing work. Research questions can include those relating to attitudes, behaviours, relationships and features/attributes of a service.

The **evidence base** is the accumulated body of findings from relevant research and evaluation projects.

In our recent inspections of probation services, we have been asking providers to submit any research plans in advance of inspection, alongside other relevant documentation. As set out within our standards framework for these inspections, we consider both adherence to the evidence base and its development through evaluation. We look to see whether a provider's strategy is explicit about the evidence base which underpins the strategic vision, and whether there are plans to build on existing research and contribute to it, including opportunities for engaging researchers.

⁴ The Rehabilitation Activity Requirement was introduced in 2014 under the Offender Rehabilitation Act as one of the requirements that can be included within a community order or suspended sentence order. It allows providers greater flexibility to decide on the best ways to support an individual's rehabilitation, with the court specifying the maximum number of days but not the nature of the activities.

Inspection standards

1.1.1 Is there a clear vision and strategy to deliver a high-quality service for all service users?

a) Does the vision and strategy prioritise the quality of service and adherence to the evidence base?

1.3.2 Does the organisation provide the volume, range and quality of services to meet the needs of service users?

f) Are interventions evidence led and evaluated, with remedial action taken where required?

1.4.4 Is analysis, evidence and learning used effectively to drive improvement?

c) Are service improvement plans supported through evaluation and development of the underlying evidence base?

d) Are processes in place to ensure that learning is communicated effectively?

In a number of reports (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2018; 2019; 2020)⁵ we have highlighted the need for increased research and evaluation. In this bulletin, we focus in further detail upon the role of providers in developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality services. Summer 2021 will see further significant reforms, with the CRC contracts coming to an end, the new probation service assuming responsibility for all service users, and specific interventions becoming available through a new dynamic framework. There are clear lessons from recent history for those designing and implementing the new delivery model.

⁵ In our 2018 Supply Chains thematic report, we recommended that CRCs 'continue to improve the evidence base that demonstrates the effectiveness of service delivery by Tier 2 providers, in achieving identifiable outcomes.' In her 2019 Annual Report, our previous Chief Inspector, Dame Glenys Stacey, was critical of the current levels of expenditure on research and the lack of evaluation accompanying important government policy initiatives. Most recently, in our 2020 inspection of the central functions supporting the NPS, we noted that 'there is little evaluation of anything other than accredited programmes, so it is difficult to demonstrate the effectiveness of other programmes.'

2. Findings

The findings presented in this bulletin are based upon three stages of research:

- (i) a review of providers' publications and key documents
- (ii) an online, largely open-ended, survey to all CRCs and NPS divisions
- (iii) targeted semi-structured interviews with provider research leads and external researchers working with providers.

Further details about the methodology are provided in Annex A. We received responses from seven providers to the online survey, and interviewed six internal/external researchers. These small samples are illustrative of the limited levels of recent research activity which we set out below.

The following sections focus upon the following two key research questions:

- Section 2.1: Are probation providers undertaking high-quality research that adds to the evidence base?
- Section 2.2: Are the research findings feeding into policy and practice?

These two questions highlight the importance of promoting adherence to the evidence base as well as its development – expanding and strengthening the evidence base is of limited value if no attention is then given to it.

2.1 Developing the evidence base

'Any probation methodology should always be seen as an open question. Established methods of intervention may need to be revised as research progressively illuminates the way in which they work and their consequences. New methods are likely to emerge and their effects should be investigated. To appraise the effectiveness of practice requires systematic research.'

Council of Europe (2010)

'It is critical that new 'evidence-led' innovations are tested and evaluated, so that the evidence base underpinning the delivery of probation services continues to develop and broaden.'

Fox and Albertson (2020)

It is beneficial to all that probation services are grounded in reliable and robust evidence, for which investment in high-quality research studies and evaluations is essential. Such studies assist with policy development and enable delivery to be improved, maximising positive outcomes for service users. Importantly, just because something makes intuitive sense does not mean that it will necessarily work and there could even be unintended consequences. Furthermore, when resources are constrained, it is vital that funds are spent on approaches that provide the greatest possible economic and social return.

Research evidence, alongside expertise and experience, underpins an evidence-informed approach. Room needs to be left for innovation, supported by clear theories of change, but there must be a commitment to evaluation.



The need for high-quality research studies and evaluations remains as strong as ever, particularly once you dig beneath the higher-level findings and start considering differing sub-groups, differing combinations of needs, sequencing issues and differing pathways to desistance.

'In the field of rehabilitation, researchers now know a lot about 'what works' in terms of programmes as well as how the desistance process works for those who are able to make real life changes. Yet, neither area of research is anywhere close to having all of the answers for practitioners. Both 'what works' and 'desistance' research areas remain vibrant, with much to learn and new findings emerging routinely.'

Maruna and Mann (2019)

2.1.1 Overall level of research activities

Regrettably, it is clear from our recent inspections and from the review completed for this project that the overall level of research activities undertaken by probation providers over recent years has been disappointing. As part of the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms, a rehabilitation industry forum was set up, the remit of which included the planning of research activities and the sharing of learning. But this forum failed to establish itself and did not lead to any consensus on research priorities or any coordinated research activities.

The requirements for providers to engage in evaluation and research were left loosely defined, and it is clear that any focus on research activities has been hindered by the resource constraints and the financial difficulties reported by a number of CRCs. Interviewees told us that some research projects proved unfeasible due to the inability to arrange access to the necessary data, staff and/or service users.

Successful research projects are championed at a senior level within an organisation, with the necessary support in place from practitioners and managers. There tends to be key gatekeepers that understand research and evaluation, and can promote and facilitate the necessary activities. But staff resources were limited across many providers, with a high degree of internal movement, redeployment and staff turnover. Access to service users is particularly dependent upon staff support, but responsible officers were stretched and had little time to dedicate to supporting research. In addition, there was some lack of understanding of research among frontline staff, preventing them from fully contributing. One interviewee stated as follows:

"Other sectors where practice is more evidence based such as education or health, we [researchers] tend to get better levels of cooperation because practitioners are more evidence based whereas in criminal justice, while they talk about evidence, practitioners are not trained in evidence use or research. [It is] not really central to their role. Practitioners are still struggling to define themselves as professionals and don't fully understand or appreciate the potential for an evidence-based practice model and therefore if you come asking for help with research, it's not always a priority."

In relation to pre-existing data within case management systems, interviewees reported that it was common to find too many gaps, missing values, and/or inaccurate classifications, restricting its value for analysis. These systems were generally not designed with research requirements in mind. This could lead to the need for workarounds, requiring further resource, for example, data being entered locally into ad-hoc workbooks or dashboards. It was also clear that there was some separation between: (i) those undertaking performance analysis or providing business intelligence support; and (ii) those seeking to analyse data for research purposes.

Due to the limited resources available to support research activities and the data limitations, as well as the desire for relatively quick findings in the post-*Transforming Rehabilitation* world (complete with new providers and commercial considerations), research projects tended to be small scale, either from the outset or having been scaled back.

2.1.2 Good practice examples

While the overall picture of research and evaluation activities is disappointing, there are some clear exceptions and good practice examples. The case studies below set out three different approaches to developing the evidence base. A common feature across the case studies is the importance of interpersonal relationships.

The first case study is an example of a provider establishing an in-house research function.⁶ This research unit has benefited from strong support at a senior level within the organisation, as well as being able to establish close relationships with colleagues, assisting with access for projects and a clear understanding of the current climate and concerns. While the commissioning and undertaking of research is very much seen as a collaborative process, the importance of maintaining researcher objectivity and neutrality is also recognised. There is a balance to be struck, and processes have been put in place to ensure sufficient independence and autonomy.

The Kent, Surrey and Sussex CRC Research and Policy Unit was established in the summer of 2018, sitting within the CRC's Excellence and Effectiveness Directorate. Over time, it grew to four full-time researchers operating within a framework of senior management oversight and research governance.

A five-year strategy for the Unit was developed, setting out a selection of short, medium and longer-term research and evaluation projects for the years 2019 to 2024. The research programme covers the following areas.

- Service models: Evaluating organisational processes to help shape management structures, staff development, risk management and court enforcement.
- Working with people on probation: Designing, trialling and evaluating approaches to working with people on probation, along with their families, other agencies and communities.
- Service user engagement: Looking at service user engagement approaches from elsewhere in the UK and around the world.
- Interventions: Evaluating the effectiveness of programmes and interventions and how they help reduce reoffending.
- Supervision and management practices: Raising awareness of best practice in the supervision and management of service users.

To help focus thinking and prioritise work, an in-house research request form was created, covering the purpose of the work, the type of research required, the timescales and the potential outputs. A steering committee was also established, including external academics who provide independent ethical guidance when required.

The commitment to transparency is evidenced by publications on a range of topics including remote supervision, domestic abuse in Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, the women's lead responsible officer role, and family involvement. These outputs demonstrate a clear focus on learning which can assist in improving the professional practice of frontline staff and in enhancing the delivery of service.

⁶ See <https://www.ksscrc.co.uk/research/> for further information.

The second case study is an example of an in-house researcher working for a probation provider. Operating as a single researcher restricts the amount of research that can be undertaken, leading to the need for pragmatism, and there are further limitations in terms of peer support and quality assurance. To help overcome these limitations, opportunities for collaboration with external researchers were sought and/or utilised. As with the first case study, working as an internal researcher helped with establishing relationships and access to practitioners, managers and service users, as well as understanding the current concerns, resource demands and overall climate.

Interserve Justice Division employed an in-house researcher to undertake research projects across its five CRCs. Many of the projects were qualitative in nature, including observations of supervisions and groups, and obtaining feedback from service users, staff and key stakeholders through interviews and focus groups (face-to-face or remotely).

To maximise resource and help with the timely progress of projects, the researcher worked with external academics in numerous ways, including:

- obtaining independent quality assurance reviews
- providing placements for Masters' students
- considering research applications from PhD students, and supporting two students to complete their doctorates
- obtaining external academic support for data coding.

Across the research projects, there was a strong focus on the delivery of interventions, including the following:

- the HELP programme for domestic abuse (see Woolford and Wardhaugh, 2019)
- an adapted HELP for women with a focus upon establishing positive relationships
- Breaking Free Online (a substance misuse intervention)
- Offploy (a social enterprise to help service users secure employment)
- peer mentoring for veterans (undertaken by Liverpool John Moores University)
- the delivery of interventions in approved premises
- the role of partnership link workers in protecting victims and children from domestic abuse.

The third and final case study is an example of a long-term research programme between a provider and an external academic institution. This programme of work benefitted from the establishment of strong relationships at a senior level at the very beginning of *Transforming Rehabilitation*. One of the academic researchers also spent a substantial amount of time on site to build relationships with individual practitioners.

The Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (PERU) at Manchester Metropolitan University worked in partnership with **Interserve Justice** across its five CRCs to provide a range of research and evaluation services around offender rehabilitation. PERU worked with Interserve to:

- evaluate a range of its offender rehabilitation interventions
- review existing research evidence to identify promising new approaches
- support the development of innovative approaches to offender rehabilitation by helping Interserve to translate research and theory into practice
- work with staff to try to ensure that evidence is translated into practice.

Interserve, supported by PERU, embarked on a 'personalisation' project to develop, pilot and evaluate more innovative approaches to personalised ways of working with service users, promoting positive life choices, tackling root causes of lifestyle problems, and building personal capacity and resilience (see, for example, Fox et al., 2018). This work drew on pre-existing 'desistance research' and the Good Lives Model (a strengths-based rehabilitative approach) as well as a series of publications by PERU staff which had explored practical approaches to implementing personalisation in the criminal justice system and how to commission personalised services. A key ingredient was increased co-creation with service users.

The following five concepts were tested in 2017:

1. Introduction of person-centred practice, including a new approach to co-production with service users
2. Choice and control promotion through use of an enabling personal fund, with a simple administrative process, to support the service user achieve specific goals and outcomes as part of a personal plan
3. Personal enabling fund for women held by a supply chain provider for female service users to enable the service to provide more flexible and personalised support
4. Co-produced projects with service users to develop their own services/enterprises with an enabling shared grant
5. Navigation and Access to Community Networks through community capacity building to offer more choice in community and accessing community services.

From these initial tests and small-scale pilots, a single, larger pilot was then developed and implemented, with PERU undertaking the evaluation, having successfully obtained European *Horizon 2020* funding.

While it was not possible to complete all the planned quantitative analysis, due to difficulties accessing the necessary data, some more innovative methods were employed, for example working with People's Voice Media to enable service users to report on their lives through an audio/visual journalistic approach. As part of the programme of work, PERU developed and tested a new Enablers of Change assessment tool (Wong and Horan, 2019; Horan et al., 2020).

2.2 Promoting the evidence base

'Finding evidence is not in itself the whole answer: persuading people that it is in their interests to pay attention to it is another challenge, and the nature of this challenge, and the uses and meanings of evidence, change over time.'

Raynor (2018)

There is a need to continually promote research findings and the key implications, particularly as evidence sits alongside other considerations and drivers such as resources, traditions and values. Put simply, developing the evidence base through new research has limited utility if it is met with little recognition, consideration and scrutiny.

The concept of 'knowledge mobilisation' covers the meaningful use of evidence and expertise to align research, policy and practice, bridging any divides through positive engagement, end-user participation and a focus on impact. Reporting findings in clear and accessible ways is critical to such engagement and impact, but has often been given insufficient attention.

'It is little wonder that research has such a limited impact upon policy or practice when its results are hardly ever formulated or disseminated in such a way as to make them easily accessible to those who make policy or practice.'

Mair (2000)

Unfortunately, as well as restricting research activities, recent resource constraints have limited the focus upon their findings. Interviewees highlighted that it was difficult to get providers to engage with completed reports due to a lack of available time. Initial quality assurance and feedback tended to be limited, people would often not turn up to meetings, and presentations would be cut short. It was common to find no clear mechanisms built into structures to learn from and use research findings.

However, for those research activities which did take place, there were positive examples of utilising differing forms of dissemination and communication. For example, the *KSS CRC Research and Policy Unit* have disseminated findings across their organisation through factsheets, newsletters, posters, blogs, webinars, workshops/symposiums, training days and team events. The collaborative approach to research, starting with the initial request and design, has helped colleagues to raise their understanding of research and then consider the findings and implications arising from specific projects. As a way of monitoring influence and impact, the team aim to follow-up projects at the six-month post-completion point.

They have also thought carefully about the wider audience, maintaining a strong commitment to openly sharing knowledge and new insights to what works within probation, contributing to the empirical evidence base. They have engaged with the wider research community through professional liaison, academic involvement, contributions to local, national and international conferences/symposiums, publications and social media platforms. Links with the Probation Institute have led to articles in the Probation Quarterly magazine, and they have utilised the CRC's organisational membership of the Confederation of European Probation (CEP).

Transparency and publication has also been an integral part of the partnership between *PERU* and *Interserve Justice*. In addition to journal articles presenting findings from the pilots, the partnership led to the launch and development of the *Reducing Reoffending*

website (<https://reducing-reoffending.uk/>), which provides a repository of evidence about interventions designed to reduce reoffending rates for adult and juvenile offenders. Interventions are rated and findings summarised based on published evidence, to enable practitioners to understand the interventions which effectively reduce reoffending. Summaries for 19 different types of intervention are now provided, and the intention is for the website to grow over time.

Within HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), there is now a dedicated group – the Insights Group – with responsibility for supporting system-wide learning across prisons and probation as a whole, drawing on data, evidence, information and experience. A key element of the group’s role is to help the organisation to apply evidence and insights in practice, and there are specific teams focused on engagement, evidence-based practice, system learning, and service user insights. As part of this agenda, the HMPPS Insights website (<https://www.hmppsinsights.co.uk/>) has been established, providing researchers with a further route to share findings in a range of formats, including blogs and online presentations. There have also been moves towards making greater use of infographics, animations and videos (see, for example, this procedural justice animation: https://youtu.be/JNvkVgA_FI).

3. Conclusion

'...there is no magic bullet to bring about a step-change in the effectiveness of probation services: development needs to be gradual and incremental, and informed at every step by evidence and evaluation rather than ideology.'

Raynor (2020)

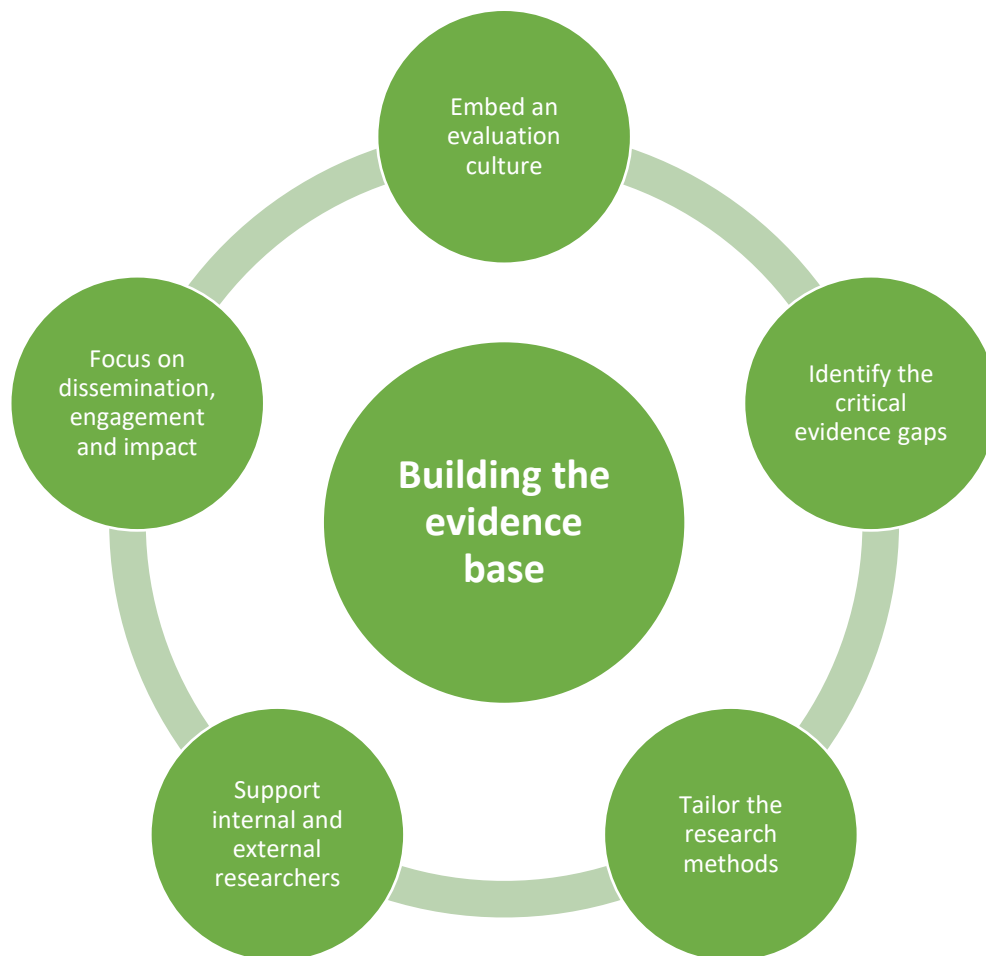
'At times of change it can be difficult to step back and either apply the insights of existing research or conduct new research to gain insights for the future. But unless this is done, practitioners and policy makers may run the risk of making decisions without the benefit of high-quality knowledge and information which is fully relevant to the changing environment. Disseminating existing research findings and supporting new research is essential to the maintenance of a vibrant professional identity and community, especially when organisational structures are changing rapidly.'

Probation Institute (2016)

While there have been good practice examples, the research activities undertaken by probation providers over recent years have been limited, and it has proven difficult to bridge the gap between research, policy and practice. Summer 2021 will see further significant reforms, with the CRC contracts coming to an end, the new probation service assuming responsibility for all service users, and specific interventions becoming available through a new dynamic framework. The *Target Operating Model (2021)* recognises 'the need to establish a strong evidence base that helps us improve service user outcomes, reduce reoffending, protect the public and support our front-line staff'. There are clear lessons from recent history for those designing and implementing the new delivery model, so that: (i) sufficient regard is given to the evidence base; and (ii) evaluations of new evidence-informed approaches are encouraged, enabling the evidence base to continue to grow.

3.1 Key requirements for building the evidence base

This section sets out five key requirements for building the evidence base, summarised in the figure below.



(i) Embed an evaluation culture

Within the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms, the requirements for providers to engage in evaluation and research activities were left loosely defined, and they were too often seen as an optional add-on. Moving forward, sufficient resourcing is required so that research activities can be completed within reasonable timescales, balancing the requirements of robustness and timeliness. But increased resources on their own are unlikely to be sufficient. There needs to be a much stronger commitment to building a research/evidence-based culture, hardwired into organisational-wide delivery models.

'To understand evaluation as an embedded practice means that it should not operate as a separate and independent function but more as an integrated part of an organisation's culture and operational structure. This means that evaluative and reflective practice is part of the 'way we do things around here' where all colleagues seek, learn and think critically about the evidence that underpins their actions.'

HM Treasury (2020)

It can be argued that at present there is a greater commitment to evidence-based practice in the health and educational spheres, with staff more open to research. To catch up, a cultural shift is required in probation, whereby supporting, co-producing or instigating research is recognised as a key part of working in probation, with clear links to professional learning, development and even career progression. There should be a commitment to upskilling staff where required so that they have a sufficient understanding of the role of research and evaluation. Staff should then be encouraged and given sufficient time, space and resources to continually reflect upon their practice and to learn from others and apply findings from research and elsewhere. This aligns well with the core HMPPS principle for an open, learning culture, with staff continually looking for ways to improve performance.⁷

One interviewee stated as follows:

"We need to build a research and evidence-based culture, making sure that it is hardwired into the new models that are being developed. Linked to that is thinking a lot about the role of the professional, and the professional status of probation officers in particular, because it feels as though for research and evidence to permeate the system, you've got to have a mass of people who understand and care about research. As they move through the organisation and become more senior, they are in positions to commission that research and champion it... If you want a really strong, rich research culture, you want probation officers getting involved in research, doing research projects, writing responses to research that's being published in journals and debating it."

As indicated in this quote, the role of senior managers and leaders is critical – they need to lead by example and model behaviours by supporting and engaging in evaluation and research activities, and seeking out learning opportunities. An appetite to embrace and learn from research findings which are both negative and positive is also required – not all innovative approaches should be expected to have the intended impact.

(ii) Identify the critical evidence gaps

As noted previously, there is good high-level evidence supporting certain approaches and interventions, but the detail below this tends to be lacking, particularly when you start considering differing sub-groups, differing combinations of needs, and sequencing issues. It is thus often unclear which approaches work best for which service users and in what circumstances and combinations. Building the evidence base on these pathways is critical so that a high-quality, personalised and responsive service can be delivered for all service users.

Research resources need to be maximised, requiring a strategic, joined-up and holistic approach to monitoring research activities, identifying the most critical evidence gaps (with an eye on potential future changes),⁸ and considering which questions can be answered in the short, medium and longer term. The research community is dispersed and forever moving, so attention needs to be given to the optimum approach for collating recent and

⁷ The NPS are establishing a new Advisory Panel for Probation Learning (APPL) which will include academic experts.

⁸ In December 2020, the MoJ published the second version of its 'Areas of Research Interest' document, highlighting existing knowledge gaps in an effort to guide researchers to help fill them. A range of questions are outlined in relation to public protection and reducing reoffending.

current research activities,⁹ including research from related areas/disciplines, and considering who may be well placed to take forward further projects, including any opportunities for collaboration. At the centre, the MoJ and HMPPS have a key role in evaluating major national policy initiatives. Research activities at the local level are equally important, taking into account the local context and circumstances, with these findings feeding into the national knowledge base.¹⁰ This requirement has recently been highlighted in relation to policing:

'Our interviews have suggested a lack of coordination in how research conducted at force level is fed into the knowledge base nationally. It will be important to determine how this can be done in a systematic way.'

Hunter et al. (2018)

(iii) Tailor the research methods

'Revision of existing laws, policy and practice shall be based on sound scientific knowledge and research that meets internationally recognised standards'

Council of Europe Probation Rule 105

There is still much to learn, and the focus needs to be upon ensuring that all research, whatever its type, is as robust and rigorous as possible, maximising its full potential. Research activities must be based on sound methodology and established scientific principles, tailored to the specific research questions. As these questions will vary markedly in nature, a wide range of research methods are required, with a recognition that differing approaches can be highly complementary.

'...we need all the science we can get – programme evaluations and narrative desistance studies – to make sense out of the complexity of crime. We need to strive to make both types of work as robust and rigorous as possible, and, crucially, we need to learn to merge the two types of evidence together as therein lies the real promise for evidence-based practice.'

Maruna and Mann (2019)

There is room for action-based research, in-depth case study work and longer-term experimental designs, potentially with random allocation, as well as newer innovative methods, for example, visual methods in data collection. It is very striking that most research and evaluation studies within probation lack an economic component, with the consequence that robust evidence on both the costs and benefits of differing approaches and interventions is generally lacking. There is thus clear scope for robust cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness studies. More generally, attention should be given to how best to utilise the knowledge and skills of social researchers, economists, operational researchers, statisticians and data scientists.

⁹ The HMPPS National Research Committee (NRC) could assist – all researchers wanting to conduct research with probation staff and/or service users are required to formally apply for research approval to the NRC.

¹⁰ The *Target Operating Model* (2021) sets out the following intention for the new deliver model: 'We are not intending to set up 12 independent research teams but for each region to be able to draw upon central knowledge sharing and service improvement resources.' Careful attention will need to be given to how to ensure sufficient activity at the local level which is then collated as part of a strategic, joined-up and holistic approach.

Increasing attention has been given in recent years to the importance of obtaining service user perspectives for a rounded understanding of probation's work, and this needs to be maintained. Within HM Inspectorate of Probation, we are increasingly seeking ways in which to include service users in our work, including in our research projects, identifying opportunities for co-creation and co-production. Service users can establish a rapport with those groups where there is a shared experience, as well as highlight aspects which have not been noticed by other researchers, such as identifying additional areas warranting attention, designing more effective research questions, and/or picking up on important themes which may not have seemed as significant to others.

For all projects and proposed methods, careful consideration needs to be given to the demands that will be placed upon frontline staff and whether there are less resource-intensive ways of obtaining the necessary data.

(iv) Support internal and external researchers

Those undertaking research projects, whether internal staff or external researchers, need to be sufficiently supported. This involves much more than financial resource, requiring the time of senior staff and engaged gatekeepers who facilitate access to other staff, service users and data.

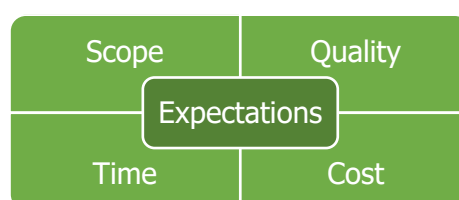
'...whilst it may be incumbent on researchers to adopt appropriate methodological approaches to engage participants in research, if organisations are serious about having researched-informed policies and practice, they also need to work with researchers to understand and overcome some of the challenges that researchers face in trying to recruit research participants.'

Sirdifield et al. (2019)

Greater attention needs to be given to ensuring that the data collated within core systems can support research activities, preventing the need for supplementary data collections wherever possible. There is scope for: (i) researchers and business/performance analysts to work more closely, helping to maximise the value of operational data; and (ii) clearer processes to support data access. Particular attention should be given to improving the availability and quality of costs data, supporting robust cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness studies, and identifying data held within different agencies and departments that could be beneficial for research purposes.

Those internal staff undertaking research projects need to be able to access the necessary training, analytical software and research literature, including journal articles through online subscriptions. Establishment of a research community or forum would be beneficial, so that researchers can support one another, with opportunities for sharing good practice, resources, learning and expertise.

Senior staff also need to understand the time required to conduct different types of research, recognising the interaction between scope, quality, cost and time.



(v) Focus on dissemination, engagement and impact

For evidence to be meaningfully used, impacting upon policy and practice, it needs to be reported in clear and accessible ways, adhering to the principles of transparency and openness. The Behavioural Insights EAST framework is helpful when thinking about communicating research findings.



Tailoring to the specific audience is required, with a focus on the key considerations and implications. A range of dissemination and communication methods can be used when thinking about 'knowledge translation' including one-page summaries, factsheets, posters, video outputs, animations, infographics, newsletters, trade journal articles, blogs, social media posts, presentations, seminars, workshops and training events. Links with other organisations and key stakeholders can also help to promote the findings from research, and ensure that developments in the evidence base are more widely recognised.

The concept of 'knowledge mobilisation' recognises the need to go beyond one-way dissemination and to think about how to ensure meaningful engagement and interaction with research findings and implications. Such engagement should start with discussions about the most effective communication channels and methods, helping to break down any divisions between 'evidence producers' and 'evidence consumers' and further embedding the evaluation culture highlighted earlier. The concept also highlights the importance of thinking about impact – this requires a sufficient focus on monitoring the influence and impact of research projects and reviewing the methods of dissemination and engagement adopted.

3.2 The role of the Inspectorate

Within the Inspectorate, we start with the principle that probation work should be evidence based or else evidence informed. It is a strategic aim of government that probation services should reduce reoffending, while also taking all reasonable steps to keep the public safe. In our view, this is most likely if probation practice is aligned to the evidence base, and if the evidence base grows over time. Continuing investment in research and evaluation is thus required, with a commitment to disseminating and promoting the findings.

In our inspections of probation services, we will continue to assess adherence to the evidence base, its development through evaluation, and how well the learning is communicated. We will continue to publish *Research & Analysis Bulletins* and *Academic Insights* papers, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders the delivery of probation services. Summaries of the current evidence can be found on our website (<https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprobation/research/the-evidence-base-probation/>) – we will continue to develop this resource over time, updating when required to reflect the latest research evidence.

We will continue to use the research evidence alongside our inspection findings to develop our inspection programmes, guidance and effective practice products. We will also use the evidence to consider system-wide change that could improve public protection, support desistance, and change people's lives for the better.

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Annex A: Methodology

Research stages

There were three main stages to this project:

- (i) a review of providers' publications and key documents
- (ii) an online survey to all CRCs and NPS divisions
- (iii) targeted interviews with provider research leads and external researchers working with providers.

Stage 1: Review of documentation

The first stage was a review of the documentation submitted by providers in advance of our recent inspections, alongside other relevant documentation in the public domain, including a review of providers' website. We looked for evidence of research strategies and plans, information on links with external academics/researchers, and any records or publications relating to specific research projects. The latter included a review of applications to the HMPPS National Research Committee.

Stage 2: Survey of CRCs and NPS divisions

We disseminated an online survey to all CRCs and NPS divisions to obtain further supplementary information on research strategies, set-up and processes, as well as details of specific research projects. The questions were largely open-ended, allowing providers to elaborate as necessary. We received responses from seven providers.

Stage 3: Interviews

Evidence from stages one and two was used to target interviews according to recent/current research or evaluation projects, including those involving partnerships with academic organisations. The interviews were semi-structured, covering:

- the planning of projects
- the research methods employed
- the use of research findings
- the key barriers and enablers encountered
- overall learning, both in terms of what had worked well and what could have worked better.

Remote video interviews were conducted with six researchers, either internal provider research leads or external academic researchers with recent experience of working with providers.

Analysis

We looked for clear themes within the information collected within the stage two survey and stage three interviews. The two researchers involved in conducting the interviews discussed and agreed these themes. Detailed coding was not undertaken due to the limited number of survey responses and interviews undertaken.