



Her Majesty's
Inspectorate of
Probation

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Dear Mary

Many thanks for the cooperation we received from you and your staff during the recent review of Probation Service – Kent, Surrey and Sussex region.

We have now completed the inspection of the West Kent and West Sussex probation delivery units (PDUs) in your region and would like to take this opportunity to share with you our overall observations.

Regional observations:

At a regional level, we have identified the following key strengths and areas for improvement:

Leadership

The last 12 months have clearly been a challenge. The creation of a new probation region in June last year, bringing together former National Probation Service (NPS) staff and Kent, Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) staff, involved the separation of some key functions that you shared with (NPS) East of England region. It also involved staff from the former CRC transferring over from a unique Seetec case management system. This significant transition has been compounded by recovery from the challenges of Covid-19. Nevertheless, your strategy and vision to move from what you describe as the 'stabilising/embedding' stage of implementation to create a high-quality service are reflected in, for example, both the Kent, Surrey and Sussex (KSS) business plan and the reducing reoffending plan. In our survey of staff (up to senior probation officer or their equivalent), 76 per cent said that the region prioritised quality and adherence to evidence.

The most significant risk to service provision remains current inadequate staffing levels across all PDUs, as well as within regional functions. Messaging about service priorities

within the prioritising probation framework are, at a regional level, clear, with an emphasis on assessment, planning and, in particular, risk and its management. However, we did not find this consistently across the two PDUs we inspected. In some cases, these messages are less well understood or adhered to and it remains unclear as to why this is the case, although there may be many reasons. Despite regular local and regional events, frequent (at least monthly) newsletters and attempts to clarify messages, such as the 'plan on a page' (to support the business plan), only 46 per cent of those responding to our survey said that change was communicated and implemented effectively.

As a consequence, and combined with limited quality assurance of casework, and weak overstretched management supervision, we found that case supervision in both the PDUs we inspected was insufficient. This was particularly the case in relation to the management of risk and keeping other people safe.

There are good examples of how the region has, appropriately, maintained regional control of some aspects of service development and delivery at PDU level to ensure consistency in a period of transition and in trying to create stability. As services are developing, some of these functions are now being taken forward, at least in part at PDU level. Examples of this include recruitment and the development of commissioned and co-commissioned services.

There appear to be strong links at senior leadership level with strategic partners, including the three police and crime commissioners and two strategic Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) boards. Engagement with the judiciary to keep it informed of service development also appears positive, with quarterly regional sentences events and newsletters.

Work to engage people on probation and to develop a better understanding of their diverse needs has been implemented at a regional level with the creation of the KSS Lived Experience steering group and the regional equalities board. However, such work has yet to manifest in any significant way at a more local, PDU, level.

Key strengths

- Key functional leads at a regional level are in post and, despite being a relatively new team, the senior leadership group clearly works in unison, shares the principles of the service and is proud to be part of the organisation.
- Strategic plans to move the service forward are both clear and flexible, recognising some of the limitations of high caseloads, low staffing levels and some relatively inexperienced staff.
- Engagement with strategic partners appears appropriate to support the development of service provision.

Areas for improvement

- The standard of case management requires urgent attention.
- The strategic vision at senior leadership level and its prioritisation focus is not being translated into frontline practice. The desire to focus resources on key risk management priorities has yet to be consistently reflected in practice.
- With limited resources, it is essential that messages about the prioritising of work on risk are clearly communicated.
- More work is required to engage people on probation and to understand the diverse needs of the population at PDU level.

Staff

Despite functional leads being in post, many support roles below them at regional level remain unfilled. This includes staff within the performance and quality team, where only 2.8 of the seven quality development officer roles identified are currently in post. A further example is the vacancy for the 'engaging people on probation' manager. In some cases, delays in recruitment remain out of the region's hands. As an example, the commissioning manager role is awaiting the outcome of a national job evaluation assessment, as is that of the regional performance manager. Such delays severely hamper the ability of regional staff and teams to take forward plans to develop services.

Across the region, there are significant staff shortfalls. Initial delays in obtaining information from the former CRC, restrictions on recruitment and a lack of detail about what staffing levels should look like created delays in recruitment. Although target operating model staffing figures for 2022/2023 have now been received, these remain in dispute and may yet change. With 70 new staff due to join the organisation in the week following our regional review (nine senior probation officers (SPOs), 22 case administrators and 39 probation service officers (PSOs)), along with six further probation officers (POs) awaiting start dates, improvements in headcount have already been apparent since the announcement of this inspection in December 2021. Nevertheless, staffing shortfalls still remained across most functions. As an example, in sentence management teams across the region, vacancy rates in April 2022 were 5.5 per cent for PSOs, 11.5 per cent for POs and 6.5 per cent for SPOs. In our regional survey, 94 per cent of staff told us that staffing levels were not sufficient.

Recruitment is further hampered by substantial delays across the region in obtaining security clearance for newly appointed staff, often in excess of four months, although this is outside of the region's control. It is encouraging that, where possible, staff are being given temporary contracts to enable them to start before the full vetting process has been completed. This has also included staff within accredited programme teams and in unpaid work services. The overall staff attrition rate for the region is 12 per cent per year.

Across the region, from your own figures, caseloads averaged 36 for POs and 50 for PSOs in January 2022. However, the PDUs inspected had caseloads above the average, with West Kent at 42 for POs and 52 for PSOs, and the West Sussex average caseload at 39 for POs and 52 for PSOs. These figures are impacted by new PSOs, staff going through the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) and newly qualified officers. This is also reflected in our practitioner interviews in West Kent, where 46 per cent of practitioners interviewed said that they had caseloads above 60, as did 42 per cent of practitioners in West Sussex. In January 2022, the workload management tool average for the region was 116.9 per cent for POs and 105.7 per cent for PSOs. In West Kent, the average was 132 per cent for POs and 106 per cent for PSOs, and in West Sussex was 124 per cent for POs and 123.6 per cent for PSOs. Senior leaders are patently aware of the impact that the lack of staff has on workloads. The regionally managed People Board reviews staffing information monthly and attempts to align staff to where there is the greatest need but, despite this strategic approach, in our survey across the region, almost 70 per cent of staff said that their workloads were unmanageable. These concerns were reflected in both of our recent PDU inspections. With increased staffing levels, this pressure will improve but it is likely to be some considerable time before this has a significant impact.

While the recruitment of staff across the region has sometimes been difficult, it is encouraging that there remains an appropriate focus on the development of staff through the PQiP. In May this year, 37 new staff are due to qualify, with a further 18 in October.

There has been an appropriate focus on training since unification, although there remains much to do. The regional learning and development plan appears appropriate, with a focus

on developing staff beyond their initial training and encouraging learning. The regional tracker of training suggests that 94 per cent of staff across the region have completed core training, an increase from 57 per cent in January. In our survey, 72 per cent of respondents said that they had sufficient access to in-service training. Nevertheless, the training and development of staff in relation to keeping other people safe, and the assessment and planning to manage risk, as reflected in both of our PDU inspections, are ineffective. A substantial number of probation practitioners have yet to complete training to enable them to manage mixed caseloads, and thus high-risk cases, although this remains a priority. Appropriate plans are in place to take this work forward and to give it the necessary priority, but more work is needed regionally to understand why even some experienced staff still struggle to understand the primacy of this work.

The regional people plan recognises the importance of wellbeing across the organisation, and the wellbeing and resilience strategy supports its implementation. Despite this, in our survey, while 74 per cent of respondents said that sufficient attention was paid to their safety, only 52 per cent said that sufficient attention was paid to their welfare. A number of events have been undertaken, both regionally and in PDUs, but it seems likely that while workloads remain high and staffing is still significantly short of its target levels, staff will continue to feel that their wellbeing is not fully supported.

Across both PDUs we inspected, there were concerns about administrative staffing levels, their workloads and training. In some cases, this impacted on their ability to support probation practitioners with the reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act that they needed to undertake their work. The recent administrative review and staff appointments are encouraging.

Strengths

- There is a clear focus, at all levels within the KSS region, on the shortfall of staff. This remains the single most significant risk for the service. The region is appropriately focused on this challenge, as evidenced by the recruitment of new staff, due to start in the week immediately following our regional review fieldwork.
- The management of PQUIPs is positive, as is the clear learning and development pathway for PSOs.

Areas for development

- There remain gaps in key regional staff sitting below strategic functional leads. This reduces the potential for the regional functions to be as effective as they should be. Some of these vacancies are due to national issues relating to the job evaluation of roles.
- Despite recruitment, there are still substantial staff shortages across the region. This impacts both on workloads and staff perceptions of their welfare.
- Despite improvements in core training for probation practitioners in recent months, more is still required, especially around issues relating to safety and the risk management of people on probation.
- Further work is required to ensure that all staff working with people on probation are sufficiently equipped to manage mixed caseloads, including those assessed as presenting a high risk of harm.

Services and interventions

A regional analysis of the needs of people on probation has been undertaken, drawing on data from both the Offender Assessment System (OASys) and nDelius (the National Probation Service's case management system). This was hampered initially, following

transition to the unified service, because the former KSS CRC had been using a different case management system (My Solution Assessment System (M-SAT)) rather than OASys, which meant that a complete picture of the needs of the whole caseload, including all low- and medium-risk cases, was unavailable. While this remains an area for development, data is improving. Analysis breaks information down to PDU and even office level, giving a reasonable picture of need. Mapping exercises have also been undertaken to identify services available in each PDU as a means of enabling staff to access appropriate provision.

The introduction of commissioned rehabilitation services (CRSs) across the region has been mixed in its effectiveness. Most of the current services provided are oversubscribed and many are having to manage waiting lists. Despite the regional approach of identifying and coordinating a team of staff acting as CRS points of contact in each PDU, in some cases staff are still not clear about what is, and is not, provided by the CRS providers, as we found in our PDU inspections. The paucity of outcome data and performance targets from these services, which have been commissioned centrally by HM Prison and Probation Service as part of a national initiative, has made it extremely difficult for the region to commission additional support for core services.

The use of the national 'refer and monitor' system to refer people on probation to services from CRS has also proved a frustration both to staff and those managing contracts at a regional level. Many staff and service providers find the system cumbersome and counterintuitive.

The commissioning of services beyond CRSs has, this year, been hampered by staffing deficits and by the regional lead only coming into post in August. Consequently, there have not yet been any co-commissioned services across the region. Despite this, there have been several initiatives that have been commissioned locally in PDUs via the Regional Outcomes and Innovation Fund. Examples of this include a backpack scheme for prison leavers, breakfast clubs ostensibly to support women's services and a one-off project with police in Sussex to offer technological guidance and training to support work with people on probation in breach of internet conditions, etcetera. Plans to take this work forward, focusing on co-commissioning and support for PDU leads in developing this work, are clear, although potentially dependent on the recruitment of a commissioning manager.

Delivery of unpaid work has been affected enormously over the last two years by the impact of Covid-19. For long periods, the service was either not running or was provided at a substantially reduced level. In recent months, provision has begun to stabilise. Individual placements across the region have restarted (281) along with the expansion of independent work projects (formally known as 'project in a box'), delivering around 10 per cent of total unpaid work hours. Provision for up to 30 per cent of unpaid work hours to be provided through education, training and employment is currently delivering at around 16 per cent of overall unpaid work delivery. New unpaid work staff have been recruited and waiting to start, and a further campaign currently anticipates 42 new staff across the region by August 2022. At the time of our inspection, the service was delivering at 110 per cent of the pre-pandemic level and had been as high as 120 per cent. As a consequence, the number of people on probation who had reached the 12-month anniversary of their order without having completed their hours had stabilised and was sitting at 30 per cent. Your unpaid team projected that this will have been largely eliminated within 12 months, although this is dependent on a number of factors, including the recruitment of sufficient staff and being able to deliver at a consistently higher level than currently.

The provision of accredited programmes has also been affected substantially by the pandemic. Limited staffing, restricted group sizes and a finite number of delivery spaces have all resulted in substantial backlogs of people waiting to start programmes. At the

announcement of our inspection in December 2021, 74 per cent of those identified for a sex offender programme had yet to start, along with 80 per cent of those waiting for a non-sex offender programme. Nevertheless, completion rates across the region for those attending programmes was 78 per cent for sex offender programmes and 40 per cent for non-sex offender programmes. The region has also introduced toolkits for practitioners to undertake work with those not meeting the prioritisation criteria for programmes, although delivery of the toolkits remains low and some questions remain about the quality assurance of this work. Accredited programme recovery plans are appropriate, and boosted by the recent potential to increase group sizes, but, as with many aspects of work across the region, are dependent on the recruitment of new staff. The roll-out of structured interventions across the region is scheduled to begin in May.

The end-state model for developing resettlement is clear and well understood by regional leaders. However, there remains some way to go for this to come to fruition. Staffing has, again, been an issue, especially when, understandably, the focus has been on filling community roles. Nonetheless, relationships with prison managers across the 11 prisons in the region appear to be good and plans to take work forward are clear. The introduction of short-term sentence teams across the region is scheduled and on target for June but their effectiveness will depend not only on having sufficient staff, but also on the relationships built between the community and prisons. Further work is also needed to build both knowledge and confidence in community staff working with prison-based Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) colleagues.

Strengths

- The analysis of the needs of people on probation has been undertaken and its quality is improving. Information can be broken down to PDU and office level.
- The mapping of external support services has also been undertaken, to improve access.
- The commissioning of local services in the last 12 months has seen some positive initiatives, and plans to expand this in the forthcoming year, including co-commissioning, are appropriate.
- Plans to improve delivery of both accredited programmes and unpaid work are appropriate and provision has been stabilised over the last four months.
- Plans to expand and reorganise resettlement provision across the region are understood and clear.

Areas for development

- More work to understand the needs of people on probation and ensure that access is consistently provided is required.
- The introduction of CRSs has been largely well managed but clarification centrally of what and how further services to support provision can be commissioned and managed is still required.
- Better understanding about what services are delivered by CRS providers and clarity about the use of 'refer and monitor' are still required by many staff.
- Substantial backlogs remain in the delivery of unpaid work and accredited programmes.
- Resettlement provision remains limited because of staff shortfalls, and the introduction of short-term sentence teams across the region is dependent on further staff recruitment. The effectiveness of resettlement services also requires community-based staff to have a better understanding of the models underpinning both short-term services and OMiC.

Information and facilities

The quality and performance team remains short on staff to fulfil the role, including a regional performance manager vacancy, although a temporary appointment is now in place. Recent improvements in staffing levels have enabled each PDU to be assigned a regional lead to support learning and manage data, although the benefits of this have still to be realised. Dashboard data provides information against agreed priorities within the prioritising probation framework, although at both regional and PDU level much of this remains rated as red (under the red, amber, green (RAG) system). The quality improvement plan remains relevant.

Numerous events are delivered across PDUs to try to ensure that messages are consistently shared, received, understood and implemented. This includes team 'huddles' briefing sessions and regional newsletters. Performance information is also discussed regionally and monitored through the monthly operations board and stabilisation/mobilisation board, with PDU leads expected to cascade information to middle managers and staff.

It remains unclear why some of the messages centred on learning and development are not manifesting in consistent effective practice.

Policies and guidance for staff are generally set at regional or national level, and available to staff via Education and Quality in Practice (EQuIP). Regular updates are also provided via email and circulated to staff. However, staff in both of our PDU inspections said that they often felt 'overwhelmed' or 'saturated' by the sheer amount of information received and that prioritising what to read could be almost impossible.

Although service directories have been developed to identify locally available provision, there is often a paucity of detail. Information provided by CRS providers is also not clear, and requires updating. Guidance about accredited programme referral, the use of toolkits (as an alternative to accredited programmes), guidance regarding forthcoming structured interventions and the development of the short-term sentence teams are all appropriate, but consideration needs to be given as to how this information is disseminated and absorbed by staff already under pressure.

Strengths

- Information sharing through a number of means is designed to reflect the learning needs of practitioners.
- Regional performance and quality leads are appropriately aligned to PDUs, despite shortfalls in team staffing levels regionally

Areas for development

- More is required to understand fully why messages regarding performance are not consistently understood by staff or translated into consistent effective practice.
- Many staff feel 'overwhelmed' by the amount of information they receive, and understanding clear messages about priorities and other provisions and developments remains a challenge.

Statutory victim work

We looked at eight statutory victim cases and interviewed the strategic lead for victims work in the KSS region. We reviewed case records to look at whether initial contact with victims encourages engagement with the victim contact scheme, whether information and communication exchange supports the safety of victims, and if pre-release contact allows victims to make appropriate contributions to the conditions of release.

Currently, if a victim chooses to opt out of contact following initial engagement, a letter is sent by the team confirming this, but information is not routinely included about alternative sources of support and help. This is an area that could usefully be developed.

Although, in most cases, initial letters offering the victim liaison service are sent out within 20 days of receiving the referral, in one case we saw during the inspection this was not the case. In a further case, we found that although the victim wanted information about decisions relating to the prisoner's release on temporary licence and their release, this did not happen until after these events. While it is likely that these oversights were due to staff sickness, we were told that better monitoring systems are now in place and that cover is usually available for such an eventuality. Nevertheless, this is an area that requires monitoring.

The management of statutory victim work has been reorganised since unification and now sits under the regional public protection lead. This arrangement appears to work well and, given the head of public protection's wider responsibilities, also ensures that work is linked appropriately to women's services and MAPPAs provision, as we saw in the small number of cases we reviewed during our PDU inspections.

Staffing has been an issue in recent months but is now more stable, with a permanent manager in post since February. The temporary manager that preceded him is remaining in post until July 2022 to ensure that an effective handover is undertaken.

There is a strong emphasis in the team on support and supervision for victim liaison officers across the region. Regular case supervision is in place and reflective practice sessions have recently started. Although caseloads can be high, there are reasonable attempts to manage these and offer support; currently, there is no workforce management tool for victim liaison officers.

KSS is part of a pilot scheme, with three other regions, looking at the extension of the victim notification scheme to individuals receiving sentences of less than 12 months for offences relating to stalking and domestic violence, along with associated offences such as breaching restraining orders. The pilot was just starting during our inspection but appears to be well organised and, while it is projected that the scheme will manage around 100 cases a year, this may well be an underestimate.

Strengths

- Statutory victim work is generally well organised, and the structure of the service is appropriate.
- There are systems in place to offer staff support and to ensure the quality of provision.

Areas for development

- Monitoring needs to be consistent, to ensure that services to victims meet agreed standards.
- Consideration should be given to the provision of information about alternative support if individuals opt out of the service following initial contact and support.

Learning from Serious Further Offence investigations

At the point at which the KSS region was created, there were two systems in place, from the former CRC and NPS services, to manage and review Serious Further Offences (SFOs). This caused significant difficulty but has now been resolved. Out-of-date action plans, relating to

reviews prior to unification, were quickly updated, and a more transparent and better monitored system is now in place.

All five SFO investigators are now in post and a regional accountability and learning panel has been created, to review cases and discuss learning and any specific action that is necessary. Learning is also shared at middle-manager meetings, with an expectation that this is cascaded and shared with probation practitioners. We found good evidence of learning being shared in one of the PDUs we inspected, but not in the other.

Of concern is the fact that some of the areas of poor practice identified in reviews of recent SFOs were very similar to what we found in our case reviews in both PDUs, including insufficient child safeguarding enquiries, a lack of active management oversight and a lack of professional curiosity.

Observations from PDUs:

Overall ratings from inspected PDUs:

West Kent PDU: Inadequate

West Sussex PDU: Inadequate

Both PDUs were inevitably impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, although we saw consistent signs of recovery. However, across both areas, the ability to meet the needs of people on probation and to protect the public were severely hampered by chronic staff shortages and attendant high workloads.

While the two PDUs had been in place for less than 12 months, there were clear foundations on which to build progress in West Sussex, but less so in West Kent. Ensuring clear messages about what to prioritise, and how, was not consistent. In West Sussex, messages were understood at all levels of staffing, unlike in West Kent, where many staff were overwhelmed by information.

While we saw some good practice in casework, especially in West Sussex, in too many cases across both PDUs there was an insufficient focus on assessing and managing risk and public protection issues. While training and staff development was improving in both PDUs, it was evidential that this was not consistently reflected in practice.

There remains much for the KSS probation region to do to take the service forward. Appropriate plans are in place to do this but they are contingent on three key factors: increased staffing levels, clear and consistent messaging, and effective staff development. Our recommendations are set out in Annexe 1, including some recommendations directed to leaders at regional and national level. I look forward to receiving your regional action plan in due course, outlining your response to our recommendations. I wish you and all your staff well in undertaking this work.

Yours sincerely



Justin Russell

Chief Inspector of Probation

Annexe one – Recommendations

Set out below are the recommendations arising from the inspection of PDUs in this region.

West Kent PDU should:

1. ensure all cases are accurately risk assessed and allocated to the correct grade of probation practitioner
2. apply a strategic approach to which cases, and which functions of sentence management, are prioritised, while there are chronic staffing shortages
3. ensure priorities are clearly communicated and understood by probation practitioners and middle managers
4. ensure case supervision is available to all probation practitioners
5. ensure sentence management staff receive the training they need in order to fulfil their roles effectively.

Kent, Surrey and Sussex (KSS) probation region should:

6. ensure that staffing and workload management data, as reported to HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), accurately reflects true vacancy rates and practitioners' workloads
7. determine the priority of intervention delivery, allocate resource accordingly, and communicate expectations clearly to probation practitioners
8. prioritise quality assurance of sentence management
9. support senior and middle managers to manage and prioritise both their individual, and their team's, workload across the PDU
10. offer additional administrative resource to expedite outstanding reasonable adjustment requests.

HMPPS should:

11. support KSS probation region to recruit and retain staff as a matter of urgency
12. support KSS probation region to expedite the vetting of newly joining staff as a matter of urgency.

West Sussex PDU should:

13. prioritise all staff receiving the training required to move to mixed caseloads, and then roll-out the training promptly to ensure caseload allocations can be made more evenly across practitioners
14. ensure staff have the relevant training to use risk and safeguarding information, obtained from key stakeholders, to appropriately inform risk assessments and sentence plans
15. ensure that administrators receive training and support to better manage the changes to their workload, following unification.

Kent, Surrey and Sussex region should:

1. share the target staffing data with the PDU so they may undertake appropriate workforce planning and support the PDU to promptly improve staffing levels
2. engage with people on probation to inform service delivery.

The Probation Service should:











3. review the provision of services delivered by CRS providers by: giving CRS providers access to nDelius and the Offender Assessment System to ensure they have adequate access to risk and safeguarding information; ensuring CRS providers are adequately resourced for the volume of referrals being made; and ensuring CRS providers are accountable for quality service delivery
4. ensure that commissioned rehabilitative service (CRS) provision meets the needs of people on probation
5. address and significantly reduce the 20-week delay in vetting for both new and existing staff
6. consider whether the Touchpoints¹ model is suitable for use in the new, unified probation service
7. consider the sequencing and priority of large-scale change projects and the impact upon staff welfare and service delivery.

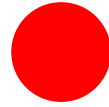
¹ The Touchpoints model supports decision-making around risks. Cases are discussed with line managers and robust risk management plans are developed. This includes a requirement to review risk management activity when issuing licence warnings and considering alternatives to recall.

Annexe 2 – PDU ratings

Set out below are the ratings of the PDUs in this region. More detail about the reasons for the ratings is available in the PDU reports, which are [published on our website](#).

Ratings

West Kent	Score	1/27
Overall rating	Inadequate	
1. Organisational delivery		
1.1 Leadership	Inadequate	
1.2 Staff	Inadequate	
1.3 Services	Inadequate	
1.4 Information and facilities	Requires improvement	
2. Court work and case supervision		
2.1 Court work	Inadequate	
2.2 Assessment	Inadequate	
2.3 Planning	Inadequate	
2.4 Implementation and delivery	Inadequate	
2.5 Reviewing	Inadequate	

Overall rating**Requires improvement****1. Organisational delivery**

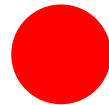
1.1 Leadership

Requires improvement



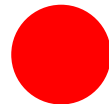
1.2 Staff

Inadequate



1.3 Services

Inadequate



1.4 Information and facilities

Requires improvement

**2. Court work and case supervision**

2.1 Court work

Requires improvement



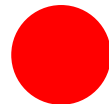
2.2 Assessment

Inadequate



2.3 Planning

Inadequate



2.4 Implementation and delivery

Inadequate



2.5 Reviewing

Requires improvement

