

Justin Russell, Chief Inspector of Probation. Speech to the Modernising Criminal Justice Conference, QEII Centre, 15 June 2022

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It's been a very tough and challenging 12 months for probation. When CRCs and NPS came together into a unified service at the end of June last year I said that this wouldn't be a magic bullet for all the deep-seated problems that were carried over from the TR period as both a legacy of TR itself and from ten years of austerity. And our inspections since then have certainly borne that out and I'll say something about those results in a minute.

Over and above those legacy issues we've had the more recent challenges of the pandemic and of the need to deliver a major change programme involving thousands of staff and tens of thousands of cases, to an ambitious timetable.

On the first of those challenges, our inspections are showing that recovery from Covid is still a long way off. Staff are now returning to the office on more days a week and a much higher % of people on probation are being seen face to face, but the quality of those appointments is still not what I needs to be – and too often are still just welfare check ins.

And we're seeing large backlogs of work. More than 13,000 unpaid work orders are reaching the end of 12 months without being completed – about a quarter of the caseload. Only just over a third of accredited programme requirements have started.

Though we found that the unification programme itself was well managed in the run up to June 2021 and the cutover happened without major mishaps – significant snagging issues remain. The process of blending caseloads is still not complete; CRC and NPS staff are still in different offices in some areas and legacy CRC staff told us last Autumn that they sometimes felt like second class citizens

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The impact of all of these issues can we seen in our recent inspection findings. This table summarises the results from our first six local inspections across three probation regions since last summer.

The results have been disappointing. Four out of six areas we've given an overall rating of 'inadequate' and we've found particular issues over staffing and services.

In relation to staffing, we're finding acute staff shortages in some areas – particularly in the South East and East of England. In a couple of areas, vacancy rates of 40% or more for key grades like Probation Service Officers and Senior Probation Officers. And this is feeding through into workloads, with a majority of staff telling us they don't think their workloads are manageable.

In relation to services and interventions to prevent re-offending backlogs are already developing for some of the commissioned support services around accommodation, ETE and women on probation. And we are seeing long waiting times to access accredited programmes and other structured interventions – which means that some people are reaching the end of their sentence without these being delivered at all. All 6 areas we've rated 'inadequate' on this quality standard.

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And we can clearly see the impact of these shortfalls feeding through into the quality of supervision and support being given to the individual cases we inspect. We've now inspected over 350 cases since last summer and this bar chart shows the proportions of these we've rated as satisfactory in relation to our quality standards and the key questions we ask around engagement with people on probation; work done to prevent future re-offending and management of risk of harm

A key reason why we're rating so many services as inadequate is that less than half the cases we're inspecting we're finding to be satisfactory against our quality standards.

That's particularly the case for work to assess and manage the risk of harm people on probation may present to others – the grey bars on this chart - where 60% or more of the cases we inspect – and up to 75% in some areas are insufficient.

Work to identify and respond to people's desistance needs – the orange bars – is also barely adequate in some areas

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And looking at the picture over time we can see that these scores have got worse since our last round of inspections.

These bar charts compare the scores on our quality standards in 2018-19 against our scores since last summer for the same six PDU areas – looking at a combined sample of cases we inspected in CRCs and the NPS in these areas three to four years ago.

On all 12 of the comparable quality standards our scores have been lower since the summer of 2021 (the blue bars) than in our previous round of inspections (the orange bars).

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So, in terms of current performance, some major challenges.

These won't be turned around over-night and I know the service itself has been managing expectations about how long the recovery will take. But to end on a more positive note, I think there are reasons to believe that this recovery will eventually happen.

First, after many years of austerity, there has finally been a significant, real terms increase in probation funding – a £155 million addition to its baseline position in the last two years – representing a 23% real terms uplift on the position in 2018.

And that resource is enabling a significant investment in new recruitment. The service was able to announce recently that it hit its target of 1500 new probation officer trainees last year and has set a public target of 1500 for the year to come.

500 new unpaid work staff are also being recruited this year and more accredited programme facilitators as well

And after many months of social distancing and staffing bubbles which meant staff could only spend 2 or 3 days a week in the office – they are now able to return to the office for more hours – though that is taking some time to pick

up. Over 70% of contacts with people on probation are now face to face compared with 10% or less at the height of the first pandemic lockdown.

And Amy Rees and the service leadership have signalled a very clear shift from a preoccupation with structural reform and Covid recovery, to a single, overarching focus on “delivering excellent probation services” – which I very much welcome

None of this will translate into overnight improvement to the quality of probation supervision but given time and sustained focus and investment I hope to start to see improvements by this time next year