



Her Majesty's
Inspectorate of
Probation

An inspection of probation services in:
Staffordshire and Stoke PDU
The Probation Service – West Midlands region

HM Inspectorate of Probation, August 2022

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Acknowledgements

This inspection was led by HM Inspector Keith McInnis, supported by a team of inspectors and colleagues from across the Inspectorate. We would like to thank all those who participated in any way in this inspection. Without their help and cooperation, the inspection would not have been possible.

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This publication is available for download at:
www.justiceinspectordes.gov.uk/hmiprobation

ISBN 978-1-914478-78-9

Published by:

HM Inspectorate of Probation
1st Floor Civil Justice Centre
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Foreword

This is the seventh Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) in England and the first in the West Midlands probation region, we have inspected since unification of the CRC and NPS services in June 2021 to form The Probation Service. Despite considerable work by staff across the area to deliver an effective service, we have rated the PDU 'Inadequate'.

Staffordshire and Stoke PDU, like most probation services, has faced considerable challenges over the last 12 months, not least the need to physically merge teams from different offices into joint locations, while simultaneously managing the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Strategically, there are clear plans about how work should be taken forward and effective relationships with partner agencies. But while these are encouraging foundations for the future, their impact is yet to be seen on the effective delivery of services. Across all five dimensions of case work we rated provision as inadequate, with particular concern around work relating to the assessment and effective management of risk and keeping others safe where less than half the cases we inspected were satisfactory.

Many staff feel their workloads are unmanageable and the amount of information they receive is excessive. They sometimes struggle to determine what are priorities when everything seems important. Regions and PDUs were given direction from a national level to prioritise resources on people on probation who posed the higher levels of risk of serious harm, but these messages were not clearly understood. This has led to staff being unclear about their roles and responsibilities. Staff vacancy levels clearly also have an impact, as have high levels of sickness. It is probable that all of these factors play a part and the PDU would do well to focus energy on clarifying what staff should prioritise, how and where, and with a greater focus on quality assurance to support development.

The introduction of a blend of home and office based working may also be a mixed blessing. While for some this is a more efficient way to balance home and work commitments for others there are indications that this may not be working. The lack of sufficient focus on managing casework we have seen in our case reviews and the insufficient overall contact with those on licences and orders highlights the need to consider the effectiveness of off-site working and what could be achieved by increased face-to-face contact.

While the PDU and senior managers will be disappointed with this inspection and the ratings it has received, this is an opportunity to reset, to focus on ensuring the basics are being done and that staff are supported in their quest to deliver the service they want to provide. Undertaking that work must be a priority.



Justin Russell
Chief Inspector of Probation

Ratings

Staffordshire and Stoke PDU
Fieldwork took place in June 2022

Score **2/27**

Overall rating

Inadequate



1. Organisational delivery

1.1 Leadership

Inadequate



1.2 Staff

Requires improvement



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



Recommendations

As a result of our inspection findings, we have made a number of recommendations that we believe, if implemented, will have a positive impact on the quality of probation services in Staffordshire and Stoke.¹

Staffordshire and Stoke PDU should:

1. improve the quality of work to assess, plan, manage and review risk of harm
2. improve the effectiveness of management oversight and quality assurance of all casework
3. engage with people on probation to inform service delivery
4. improve local arrangements to monitor and analyse performance data regarding equality and diversity, and identify any identifiable disproportionality
5. ensure that the interventions necessary to improve desistance and reduce reoffending and risk of harm are provided and accessed in all cases.

West Midlands region should:

6. ensure that management information in relation to commissioned rehabilitative services referrals is available for PDU managers and analysed effectively to increase the use of available services
7. ensure that smarter working arrangements support effective communication and professional development.

¹ Progress against previous inspection recommendations for the relevant Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) or National Probation Service (NPS) division are included in annex one.

Background

Staffordshire and Stoke PDU is one of nine PDUs in the West Midlands probation region. As of 29 June 2022, the total caseload of the region was 21,116, with 3,240 of the cases managed in Staffordshire and Stoke.² Of these cases, 1,536 were community orders and 1,009 licence cases, with a further 695 held in custody. The PDU has five operational offices at Stoke, Stafford, Tamworth, Burton and Cannock. Over half of all cases are held at the Stoke office, based at Melbourne House.

The PDU's area covers the populations of the city of Stoke-on-Trent (a confederation of six towns) and Staffordshire county. The estimated resident population for Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent is 1,111,200 and covers a geographic area of 1,048 square miles. Within Staffordshire there are nine district councils. Staffordshire also has its own active Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner who actively oversees partnership activity covering a number of regional reoffending-based themes that forms part of the Reducing Reoffending Plan and strategy.

The PDU serves two Crown Courts, in Stoke and Stafford, and two magistrates' courts, at the North Staffordshire Justice Centre in Newcastle-under-Lyme and at Cannock. The area also accommodates five prisons – including two that are private and a women's prison – along with two young offender institutions. There are also three Approved Premises for men; Wenger House and Wharflane House in the North of the PDU and Staithesford House in Stafford.

In June 2021 the former Staffordshire and West Midlands CRC and the West Midlands NPS were unified. Staff within Staffordshire and Stoke PDU largely continued to operate in their original teams until April 2022 when they were realigned to incorporate both mixed teams and mixed caseloads. This reorganisation was managed over a three-month period until the beginning of June 2022.

We conducted fieldwork in Staffordshire and Stoke PDU over the period of one week, beginning 13 June 2022. We inspected 79 cases where sentences and licences had commenced between 01 and 07 November 2021 and 29 November and 05 December 2021. We also conducted 75 interviews with probation practitioners. During the fieldwork the PDU was still operating reduced face-to-face contact with people on probation and was also still subject to the 'National standards lite' delivery model.

In line with the national target operating model, The Probation Service has commissioned external providers to deliver rehabilitative services in Staffordshire and Stoke. The services commissioned are NACRO for accommodation; Maximus for education, training and employment; Changing lives for women; and Ingeus for personal wellbeing.

² HM Prison and Probation Service's digital workload measurement 10 June 2022.

1. Organisational delivery

There are clear links between the Staffordshire and Stoke Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) and regional services, with appropriate mechanisms to ensure the implementation of both national and regional strategies. Partnership relationships across the area continue to be a strength and appropriate representation at all levels is widely made by managers. In some cases however, despite good strategic arrangements, these are not consistently translating into effective practice.

Despite clear attempts to alleviate the pressure on a staff group that widely describes itself as 'overwhelmed', how effective this has been remains unclear. Messages about what and how to prioritise cases is self-evidently having only limited effect; many staff think communication across the PDU is a weakness.

Caseloads are not, on average, excessively high but staff shortfalls across all operational grades and the complexities of the cases that many manage compound some of these difficulties. High levels of sickness, especially at the turn of 2021/22, have further exacerbated pressures. It is encouraging that there is evidence of sickness levels reducing, but this will have to be managed carefully to avoid a false dawn.

Training and staff development, quality assurance and reflective practice all underpin the development of effectiveness, and some aspects are clearly in place. There are, nevertheless, absences, whether in the focus of supervision, clear messaging about managing complex cases or on engagement with key partner agencies.

As the availability of accredited programmes increases and access to commissioned rehabilitative services (CRS) becomes better understood, managers need to ensure that access is consistently pursued to ensure the services required to reduce the risk of people on probation reoffending and to manage their risks of harm are addressed. Similarly, managers need to consider if current smarter working arrangements³ are operating effectively and if their much-vaunted benefits are undermined by a lack of consistent team and colleague support.

Strengths:

- The links between the PDU and region in determining the strategic direction of the organisation are well established and appropriate.
- Despite high vacancy rates, attempts to recruit and to reduce their impact are appropriate.
- There is a good number of Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) trainees in the PDU, and we saw some good practice.
- Accredited programme delivery has now recovered from the Covid-19 pandemic and people on probation are able to access programmes with no risk of not being prioritised.
- Buildings across the PDU are appropriately accessible.

³ Hybrid working arrangements where business need allows. This is an informal, non-contractual form of flexible working that blends working from an office base and/or from home.

- The management of the estate since unification has been good and the refurbishment of offices since have been well managed.
- Performance and quality review meetings are regular, and their focus is comprehensive, but more attention is needed to improve the quality of work undertaken by probation practitioners.

Areas for improvement:

- Many staff do not feel that change is communicated effectively.
- Although caseloads are reasonable, some probation practitioners do not feel their workloads are manageable.
- The introduction of 'National Standards Lite'⁴ and the probation priority frameworks have been appropriate attempts to manage demand, but their impact has been limited.
- Supervision is regularly provided but its effectiveness in improving the quality of casework is yet to be seen.
- Initiatives to improve the quality of work have been positive but their application is not yet imbedded.
- Although only launched in June 2022, the current use of structured interventions is disappointingly low, despite pressure practitioners report on their workloads.
- While there are good strategic links with both police and children's services, this does not translate into necessary domestic violence or safeguarding checks.

1.1. Leadership



The leadership of the PDU enables delivery of a high quality, personalised and responsive service for all people on probation. Inadequate

In making a judgement about leadership, we take into account the answers to the following three questions together with the results of our review of cases against the domain two standards. A key element of leadership is the ability to deliver results in practice and therefore we operate a decision rule which means that if the results from each area of the domain two standard are inadequate or requires improvement then performance against the leadership standard can only be rated inadequate or requires improvement. For Staffordshire and Stoke PDU that decision rule is in operation which has resulted in a rating for leadership of 'Inadequate'.

⁴ An agreed amendment to probation National standards to facilitate contact with people on probation

Does the vision and strategy of the PDU leadership team drive effectively the delivery of high-quality services for all people on probation?

The strategic link between the Staffordshire and Stoke PDU and West Midlands region is evident, primarily through the West Midlands regional Reducing Reoffending and delivery plan. This aligns appropriately with the Staffordshire Reducing Reoffending strategy (2022-24) which is in the process of being updated in conjunction with partner agencies. An action plan to take this work forward is still required.

Partnership arrangements and relationships have been a long-standing strength of the PDU and have been maintained since unification. In particular, the community safety partnership and reducing reoffending board (along with a number of sub-groups sitting below it) enable strong strategic and operational links between services. Examples of how this has happened includes recent funding for mental health nurses and education, training and employment (ETE) provision for integrated offender management (IOM) in the area.

The head of the PDU and his two deputies describe supportive relationships with regional leaders. While much service delivery is determined at either national or regional level, the PDUs senior leadership team retains autonomy over how some of this activity is introduced and developed. Examples include the implementation recently of a local recruitment drive for probation services officers (PSOs), the timescale for implementing multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) Level 1 (routine risk management) case planning and through March and April, the restructuring of teams across the PDU to align casework. Positively, in our staff survey, completed fully or partially by 48 probation practitioners, 30 out of 42 said the organisation prioritised quality and adherence to evidence in the work it undertook.

Despite the PDU's strengths in relation to partnerships and alignment with regional delivery plans, this does not translate to frontline service delivery as shown by our casework review.

The introduction of the prioritising probation framework and subsequent 'National Standards Lite' amendments, identifying work to prioritise while reducing the levels of engagement with lower-risk cases, was adopted across the region in recognition of staff shortages and high workloads for staff. However, the extent to which messages about what probation practitioners should prioritise and how has not been fully disseminated, as is reflected in much of the casework we reviewed, particularly around issues of risk assessment and management. Only 16 out of 42 staff in our survey said that change in the PDU is communicated and implemented effectively.

Many staff spoken to told us that the amount of information they receive can make it difficult to identify that which is essential. Some also said that there was little time or space to discuss important issues around service development and practice. In our staff survey, only 24 out of 42 of respondent said that the organisation's culture promotes openness, constructive challenge and ideas.

Staffordshire and Stoke PDU works with and supports the implementation of the regional equalities' roadmap. It does not have its own plan. There is little consistent monitoring of outcomes for people on probation against protected characteristics and, with the exception of services for women, there is also little locally to reflect and develop services specifically for people on probation with a protected characteristic.

Are potential risks to service delivery anticipated and planned for in advance?

Overall, risks to service delivery across the PDU are understood reasonably well. Much of this is, in reality, managed at regional level via the West Midlands regional risk register which is also reviewed on a monthly basis. Staffordshire and Stoke PDU's business impact analysis and risk management plan also reflects local risks and contingencies, with reviews undertaken and managed through the monthly all-day management meetings. A good example of how risks have been managed at a local level includes planning for the refurbishment of both the Stafford and Tamworth offices, and the relocation of staff elsewhere within the PDU.

The realignment of all staff teams across the PDU between April and June 2022 has also been managed appropriately. The need to bring legacy National Probation Service and Community Rehabilitation Company teams together in integrated teams (as distinct from fundamentally the same teams as they transferred from their legacy services as) required significant planning and risked substantial disruption. The decision to delay this from the end of 2021, when staff sickness was at a peak, reflects the consideration given, as does the graduated approach and avoidance of the 'big-bang' impact. We were told that all but one member of staff was offered their choice of locations.

Smarter working has been implemented across the PDU with staff able to work up to 50 per cent of their time at home. Office alignment has incorporated this work appropriately into the risk evaluation associated with office refurbishment. The actual impact of such working practices has, however, still to be fully evaluated to ensure they meet the business needs of the organisation. Our review of cases suggests that too often the level of contact between probation practitioners and people on probation is too infrequent. In 28 out of 69 cases we found the level and nature of contact was insufficient to reduce reoffending and support desistance, and in 29 out of 74 cases contact was insufficient to effectively manage and minimise the risk of harm. The extent to which this is impacted by staff working from home is something the service will need to keep under review.

Does the PDU ensure the delivery model meets effectively the needs of all people on probation?

Delivery plans in Staffordshire and Stoke PDU reflect the regional model and incorporate objectives specifically oriented to meeting regional objectives, which in turn are linked to HM Prison and Probation Service's priorities. Initiatives within this model, specific to the PDU, include the development of the personality disorder pathway and work with partners around improving safeguarding arrangements.

Provision in the PDU is divided across five operational probation offices as well as IOM co-located sites based with police. The PDU also includes five prisons and two young offender institutions. There are two specialist teams; the community hub and the recently formed Short-term sentence team. The latter remains in the early stages of development.

The primary focus of the PDU over the last 12 months has been on implementing unification and demand management. The approach now is that of implementation.

Numerous events to share developments with staff have been undertaken both regionally and across the PDU. Senior probation officers (SPOs) are also responsible for communicating PDU decisions and information to their own teams. However, it was evident from our discussions with staff at all levels that understanding about

service developments and the use of resources designed to reduce staff work pressure and how work should be managed was inconsistently understood and irregularly applied. Examples of this are the introduction of the community hub and post sentence supervision (PSS) licence regional pilot. The hub was introduced to take cases that require little oversight because of work completed, which could include cases subject to PSS. However, in a number of examples we found that cases were being managed by the hub where there were still significant concerns relating to risk and increased oversight was necessary.

Work to engage with, and seek the views of, people on probation across the PDU was underdeveloped. Despite some regional developments, no forums or user groups had been developed locally. Only 18 out of 38 practitioners in our survey said that the views of people on probation were sought, analysed and used to review and improve the effectiveness of services, which was similarly reflected (44 per cent) in our own survey of those with lived experiences of probation.

Despite some of the positive evidence, given our case review findings, questions remain as to how effective work undertaken has been in ensuring strategic overview is translated into effective work with people on probation.

1.2. Staff



Staff are enabled to deliver a high-quality, personalised and responsive service for all people on probation.

Requires improvement

In making a judgement about staffing, we take into account the answers to the following four questions. A key element of staffing is whether staff within the PDU are empowered to deliver a high-quality, personalised and responsive service for all people on probation. For Staffordshire and Stoke PDU, despite some positive developments, high work pressures, limited quality assurance and questions about the impact of these on effective casework development has resulted in us rating this section on staff as one of 'Requires improvement'.

Do staffing and workload levels support the delivery of a high-quality service for all people on probation?

Figures received from the PDU during the inspection indicate that there are currently significant staff shortfalls. There are 14.75 PSO vacancies, based on the target operating figure for 2022-23, equating to 26 per cent. For probation officers (POs) this is 14.83 (16.58 per cent) and for case administrators the figure is 6.54 (17 per cent).

These shortfalls remain a considerable challenge to managers trying to implement effective delivery. Reasonable efforts were being made to manage these challenges through monthly workforce management meetings – linking directly to those at regional level – and attempts to use staff expeditiously, but delays in getting target operating model figures from the centre has been a huge frustration.

Figures from the PDU suggest that average caseloads for POs across the PDU's area are 33.7 and for a PSO 44.9. Both these figures were considerably lower than at the point of unification when the figures were 39.4 and 54.3. In our staff survey 27 out of 38 respondents said they had caseloads up to 40 and 69 per cent of probation practitioners we interviewed said the same. While these figures indicate some

improvements in workloads, the workload average for a PO is, nevertheless, 116 per cent. The average is 85 per cent for a PSO, not including the high number of PQiP trainees whose caseload is very small. In our probation practitioner interviews, 43 per cent said their workload was unmanageable which was also reflected by 25 out of 38 of those who completed our staff survey. The reasons for this appear to centre on the complexities of the cases they are managing. Of those responding to our survey, 31 out of 38 also told us that they did not believe there was sufficient staffing in the PDU.

SPOs have staff teams varying from 11 to 19 in number. Workloads were said by some to be sometimes overwhelming and that there was little or no latitude if staff were absent or there was a crisis. Others however did acknowledge some potential flexibility. Administrative staff described their workloads in a similar manner and that, while training they had received immediately before and following unification had been sufficient, the span of their responsibility was now such that they lacked confidence in some of their tasks.

These pressures are acknowledged by both PDU and regional leaders. They have been drawing on the prioritising probation framework and 'National standards lite' demand management models, which offer staff an alternative to reduce their level of contact with lower-risk people on probation, but the impact these have remains unclear.

Sickness absence has been a significant issue for the PDU in the last 12 months, in particular in relation to stress and anxiety. Data received from the PDU during the inspection indicate that sickness levels reached a peak at the turn of the year when the rolling annual average number of days lost was 21.1 in December 2021 and 22.5 in January 2022. Since then, through rigorous management and initiatives to try and reduce staff pressure, the rate has reduced a little. In April the rolling annual average was 17.6 days, although the rate for April, if replicated over 12 months, would be 9.8 days. This remains an area of risk for the service and one that is monitored closely.

Do the skills and profile of staff support the delivery of a high-quality service for all people on probation?

The staffing profile of the PDU does not fully reflect either the local population or the profile of people on probation. As an example, 85 per cent of staff are women. Seven per cent of staff are from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background compared with 11 per cent of people on probation. It is also not clear if staff in this protected characteristic reflect the ethnic range in either the area or caseload.

Although there was no specialist women's team in the PDU there are some female probation practitioners who took most female people on probation. Female cases we reviewed were generally managed well. The Short-term sentence team was still in its relative infancy but progressing reasonably well. It is currently staffed only by PSOs. As a consequence, although they manage those released from custody serving up to a year, this did not include those assessed as high or very high risk of harm.

In our questionnaire, 30 out of 38 staff said they were allocated cases for which they have the appropriate knowledge, skill and experience all or most of the time. This was even higher (93 per cent) among staff we interviewed specifically in relation to the case under review. While this was encouraging, given our case review findings, some doubt must be cast upon these views.

The PDU has 33 probation practitioners currently studying for the PQiP. While this is encouraging, the resource is that of the region and it is acknowledged that only a proportion will come to Staffordshire and Stoke PDU. While middle-management resource is in place for this group, many qualified frontline probation practitioners expressed frustration, feeling that they were also supporting new staff and investing much time in their development without the PDU necessarily reaping the benefits; a particularly sensitive issue given the shortfall of staff currently in the PDU.

There are presently no volunteers or mentors in post in Staffordshire and Stoke PDU to support people on probation. The exception to this is a small number of cases being mentored and supported as part of a very positive initiative under the local personality disorder pathway. Despite disruption to the project due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is presently rebuilding.

Does the oversight of work support high-quality delivery and professional development?

Probation practitioners should receive structured supervision from their line manager every four to six weeks. In our questionnaire, 28 out of 38 respondents said they did. However, only 21 out of 38 said that they received supervision that enhances the quality of their work with people on probation. Some managers told us that the focus of supervision was not always on casework but sometimes on issues around staff welfare or other associated factors given the pressure so many staff felt under. This feels to be an appropriate response.

A number of initiatives have been introduced into the PDU in the last year which are designed to help managers support probation practitioners in developing their practice. This includes reflective practice via SPOs drawing on the Skills for Effective Engagement Development (SEEDS2) model and Self-Assessment Quality Assurance framework along with the touchpoints model. While all positive initiatives, their implementation is not well coordinated or, as with SEEDS2, they have yet to be embedded. However, while some cases we reviewed were well managed and there was evidence of management support, overall, only 25 per cent of cases were assessed as having sufficient management oversight. Clearly more work is required to improve both the frequency and effectiveness of this oversight.

A PQiP mentor guide and agreement is in place within the PDU and in our casework review we saw a number of examples of cases being well managed. However, it was of some concern that despite the positive work undertaken, some PQiP trainees said they were unclear about where responsibility was for their support and guidance; the PO mentor, field SPO or PQiP SPO. While the model should be clear we are not assured of its consistent implementation and as such it is potentially another example of a lack of clarity in practice across the PDU.

Of those for whom it was applicable, 20 out of 24 respondents said they had sufficient access to pre-qualifying training routes. Positively, three POs have also recently joined the PDU following completion of the PSO pathfinder progression route. Four SPOs have been recently supported to be confirmed permanently in post having been acting-up in the role.

Considerable training has been rolled out across the PDU since unification. This has mostly taken the form of e-learning along with staff briefings and some local training and mentoring. In our survey 23 out of 38 staff indicate that a culture of learning and continuous improvement is actively promoted in the organisation. Some staff however told us that they did not feel they had time to undertake training. Records

of what training has been undertaken, and by whom, is not held centrally within the PDU and it is not therefore known how many staff have completed what work.

In conjunction with the regional equality roadmap, a mentoring support scheme for black, Asian and minority ethnic staff is in place with participants from the PDU involved. Although 17 out of 38 respondents in our questionnaire said that staff from all backgrounds have equal access to promotion and 14 said they did not know, it was of some concern that seven said that they did not, or did not that often. It was not clear why this perception exists but will need to be explored further by the PDU.

No staff in the PDU are currently subject to performance management. However, given the high levels of sickness, much work has focused on sickness absence procedures.

Do managers pay sufficient attention to staff engagement?

Views held by staff about the level of support they feel is available across the PDU was variable. While 22 out of 38 staff in our survey say that sufficient attention is paid to their safety, only 14 out of 38 say that their wellbeing is attended to. It is likely that at least some aspects of views relating to wellbeing are as a result of the pressure that staff are presently experiencing. Some staff were aware of wellbeing champions while others are not. It was acknowledged that some wellbeing support had diminished as the impact of the pandemic had declined and that this needs to be re-launched.

Some staff told us that they often felt 'fobbed-off' by managers when they made approaches about work-related stress and, although many acknowledge that there is little flexibility to reduce workloads, they still feel frustrated. Messages about more resources coming and that 'things will get better' are beginning to wear quite thin.

Of those in our survey who indicated they required reasonable adjustments in their workplace, 10 out of 16 said they had been afforded necessary changes. Nevertheless, some felt that more could, or should, have be done.

Only seven out of 38 staff told us that exceptional work is recognised and rewarded. While there have been examples of staff receiving awards at the annual regional awards event, some staff spoken to did not feel that everyday work was consistently appreciated.

1.3. Services



A comprehensive range of high-quality services is in place, supporting a tailored and responsive service for all people on probation.

Inadequate

In making a judgement about services, we take into account both the answers to the following three questions and also the rating given to implementation and delivery in the cases review. The rating for services has been driven by the inadequate ratings in the implementation and delivery section. Despite a range of services and interventions being available, in only 42 per cent of cases we reviewed did we assess that the implementation and delivery of services effectively supports the person on probation's desistance and in only 37 per cent of the cases did it support the safety of other people.

Are the right volume, range and quality of services in place to meet the needs of people on probation?

Characteristics of inspected cases⁵

Proportion of inspected cases who are female	10%
Proportion of inspected cases who are black, Asian or minority ethnic	13%
Proportion of inspected cases with a disability	39%
Proportion of inspected cases where inspectors identified drug misuse problems	43%
Proportion of inspected cases where inspectors identified alcohol misuse problems	51%
Number of accredited programme requirements for individuals convicted of a sexual offence that have not commenced ⁶	63%
Number of accredited programme requirements that have not commenced, other than for individuals convicted of a sexual offence	56%
Proportion of unpaid work requirements with hours outstanding beyond 12 months	41.6%

Given our poor finding mentioned above in relation to services to support desistance and keep people safe it was surprising that 23 out of 38 probation practitioners in our survey and 86 per cent of those we interviewed said they have access to an appropriate range of services to meet the needs and risks of people on probation. It would seem that, despite the availability of services, they are not being consistently accessed by probation practitioners; or where they are, not the full range necessary.

Accredited programmes delivered across the PDU includes a suite of provision for those convicted of a sexual offence along with Building Better Relationships and the Thinking Skills Programme for others. Managing the demand for programmes during the Covid-19 pandemic was a challenge, with limited delivery possible due to both the limited number of participants on a given course and the limited availability of delivery space. An appropriate use of the prioritisation framework ensured those unable to complete programmes in the required time had responsibility for alternative interventions returned to their probation practitioner. Restrictions have now all but gone and face to face sessions are being delivered with up to 12 participants, as before lockdown. Consequently, delivery is now consistent,

⁵ HM Inspectorate of Probation inspection data.

⁶ Data supplied by The Probation Service.

and we were informed that anyone now identified for an accredited programme would, subject to compliance and meeting the criteria, be able to complete.

Where individual work is delivered as an alternative to an accredited programme, nationally agreed toolkits are predominantly in use. Nevertheless, some probation practitioners have found the level of support, guidance and monitoring available to help them in the delivery of these toolkits to be quite limited. There is little quality assurance or monitoring of how many staff are either presently delivering them or how many people on probation have completed the work.

CRS, introduced at the point of unification, provides services to people on probation that cover women's services, ETE, personal wellbeing and accommodation support. Data indicates that while demand for women's services has exceeded projected levels, those for other services have been below target. This somewhat contradicts what providers told us and casts some doubt on the reliability of the data. Nevertheless, from our own review of cases and from feedback from probation practitioners, provision for women, ETE and personal wellbeing is of a good standard.

Accommodation appears more of a mixed picture with a concern that, while support is provided, this does not consistently provide actual housing – although we were told by the provider that their rate of actually accommodating people on probation was around 50 per cent. In a number of the cases we reviewed, accommodation was found for the person on probation, but via sources other than the CRS provider.

The use of 'refer and monitor' remains, as in other areas, a source of some frustration for both providers of services and probation practitioners. The quality and consistency of referrals does however appear to be gradually improving.

Women's services provided by Changing Lives is generally good. Two centres are available; one in Stoke, the other in Stafford. Generally, demand at Stoke appears reasonably consistent, but this is less so at Stafford and further work is required to build demand. In our case review we saw a number of examples where probation practitioners had drawn on the support of the women's services in the PDU to good effect.

Disappointingly, despite considerable publicity, the introduction of structured interventions from the beginning of June 2022 via the interventions team has been poorly supported. Only 11 referrals had been received for the four programmes at the point of starting. This is particularly surprising given concerns expressed by many staff about the pressures they feel and how such programmes could offer support. The service is nevertheless actively working with probation practitioners to improve participation numbers.

The impact of Covid-19 on the delivery of unpaid work is still being felt, although this too is improving. The service is currently delivering at around 80 per cent of pre-pandemic levels, with gradually rising numbers on site. As with accredited programmes, we were told that, with the same caveats as before, anyone now subject to an order would be able to complete it. The use of ETE provision for those on unpaid work is low, which is disappointing given the continued shortfall in delivery.

Are relationships with providers and other agencies established, maintained and used effectively to deliver high-quality services to people on probation?

Although 74 per cent of probation practitioners said that in the case under review there were effective working relationships with other agencies to support the person on probation's desistance and 70 per cent in terms of managing their risk of harm to others, this was not what we found in case inspections.

Strategically there are good relationships with both police and children's services across the PDU. Clear channels for information sharing are in place along with links to specialist services, including the police's Violence reduction team. Recent developments with both Staffordshire and Stoke safeguarding boards to improve the ease with which safeguarding checks can be made have been positive, enabling telephone referrals to speed up the process and improve communication.

Disappointingly, despite these arrangements, we did not see them translate into consistent practice. In 41 per cent of initial case assessment we reviewed, necessary domestic abuse checks were not undertaken nor was safeguarding information shared in 29 per cent of cases at the point of assessment. Nor was the involvement of other agencies in managing and minimising the risk of harm sufficiently well-coordinated during the implementation of casework in 44 per cent of cases we reviewed.

Relationships with sentencers is described as reasonable, with regular liaison meetings taking place. A recent survey undertaken by the PDU with sentencers was largely positive, if limited in its extent. It is acknowledged by managers that more needs to be done to engage sentencers and ensure effective information sharing.

Resettlement

Staffordshire and Stoke PDU has within its remit five adult prisons (including one for women) and two young offender institutions. The introduction of Offender Management in Custody has not been without its difficulties and staffing continues to be an issue. In February the PDU set up the Short-term sentence team, responsible for those individuals sentenced to less than 12 months. Progress in introducing this team has been steady and three PSOs who formerly were in 'through the gate' roles in custody are part of the team. Presently, people on probation assessed as high/very high risk of harm are not included and responsibility remains with their field PO. It is anticipated that this will change by the end of the summer.

Overall, we found little difference between those cases on licence and those on community orders in the quality of work undertaken. In fewer than half the cases did we assess that the community offender manager ensured a proportionate level of contact with the prisoner before release or that they addressed key risks of harm before release. In a slightly higher number of cases, we did assess that key resettlement or desistence needs were assessed before release, but even then, only in a little over half the relevant cases.

Nine of the 13 high/very high risk of harm cases we reviewed were licence cases. Eight of them were assessed as having had key resettlement or desistence issues addressed prior to release, and in seven out of eight cases appropriate housing was sought and found for them, which is encouraging, but work regarding the addressing of key issues relating to risk was sufficient in only half the cases.

In a number of cases we saw good examples of community offender managers undertaking videoconferences with prisoners prior to their release, and in some

cases multiple such meetings. This was often supported by good liaison between the community and prison community offender managers. In such cases release management planning was invariably effective. The converse, inevitably, was also the case, as the following example demonstrates:

Poor practice example

Jonny is a 22-year-old man who received a 15-month custodial sentence for offences including possession of an offensive weapon and possession with intent to supply cannabis. Some of these offences had carried over from the activation of a previous suspended sentence order.

Resettlement planning was poorly coordinated, despite eight months in custody. No referral was made for accommodation by the community offender manager until two days prior to release and there was a risk of Jonny being released homeless. In the event he stayed at the family home which had been previously assessed as unsuitable by the probation practitioner. This was not challenged initially, despite the fact that there were child safeguarding issues. Jonny was unmotivated, isolated and bored in custody, and little was done in the lead up to release to address this.

He has since been enabled to drift through supervision, remains unmotivated, isolated and bored with no aspirations for the future.

1.4. Information and facilities



Timely and relevant information is available and appropriate facilities are in place to support a high-quality, personalised and responsive approach for all people on probation. Requires improvement

In making a judgement about information and facilities, we take into account the answers to the following four questions. We have assessed that information and facilities insufficiently support a high-quality, personalised and responsive approach for all people on probation and have therefore rated this as 'Requires improvement'.

Are analysis, evidence and learning used effectively to drive improvement?

Monthly performance and quality meetings at regional level are replicated across the PDU to ensure information and data sharing through middle managers. Meetings evidentially focus on both performance targets and quality improvement, although the greater emphasis is inevitably on the former.

Quality improvement is ordinarily driven through the regional Quality development team. Due however to prioritising frontline operational requirements, the team were reduced to just five Quality Development Officers at the time of inspection, from a planned compliment of 13. This had substantial impact. Some provision was available for the PDU but there was an expectation that SPOs pick up further assurance work and little evidence that they have the capacity to do so. The West Midlands regional

quality improvement plan includes developments to improve the quality of practice in the year to April 2023 but remains in the early stages of implementation. Given the paucity of effective casework in our case review, serious questions remain as to how effective quality improvement is in the PDU at the present time.

Learning from serious further offences was shared with middle managers via the deputy PDU lead who has a regional role in reviewing and managing this work. This model appears to work reasonably well.

Although some data is broken down by protected characteristics at regional level, we saw no evidence that this is evaluated at PDU level.

Do the policies and guidance in place enable staff to deliver a high-quality service, meeting the needs of all people on probation?

Policies and guidance are generally managed at national and regional level. All policies are stored on the services EQuIP/intranet platform and all staff have easy access to them. In most cases staff only access documents when they need them.

Senior leaders have engaged staff in discussions regarding the introduction of new policies and procedures, although it is acknowledged that this has not always been easy. Much of it has been done via briefings and it is not always clear how engaged staff are. The pace of change has been rapid, and many staff have felt unable to keep up with some changes.

There is information about CRS for probation practitioners and those we spoke to appeared reasonably knowledgeable. However, more to promote what is available beyond commissioned services would be beneficial to probation practitioners.

Do the premises and offices enable staff to deliver a quality service, meeting the needs of all people on probation?

Buildings across the PDU are accessible for both people on probation and staff.

Some staff have been frustrated by their lack of access to the two offices being refurbished but overall, this work has been managed well and efficiently.

Estate management since unification has been clear and appropriate. With the merging of teams between April and June 2022, legacy issues relating to former employers were not in evidence during our inspection.

In surveys both probation practitioners and people on probation indicated that they felt safe. Of the probation practitioners who completed our survey, 26 out of 38 also said that the premises and offices support the delivery of appropriate work and the effective engagement of people on probation.

Do the information and communication technology (ICT) systems enable staff to deliver a high-quality service, meeting the needs of all people on probation?

All practitioners have access to both an iPhone and laptop computer. Although some probation practitioners and administrative staff expressed frustration at the poor quality of Wi-Fi access in some offices, this appears to have been an issue for some time. However, all desks have ethernet cables which allow laptops to plug-in and access the internet with relative ease. In our survey, 22 out of 38 respondents said that ICT systems enabled them to deliver work in a timely way, and to access information as required.

The One Staffordshire Information Sharing Protocol was introduced to clarify and facilitate the effective sharing of information between partner organisations. While a good initiative, not all staff were aware of its existence.

Feedback from people on probation

Work engaging people on probation remains in its early stages in the PDU. Regionally, peer mentor coordinators are in place, but such work has yet to be developed locally. A survey of people on probation was undertaken across the region at the end of 2021, with PDU data broken down further although this has yet to be fully evaluated.

In our own survey of people on probation, conducted by User Voice, we received feedback from 57 individuals, including 11 women. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted.

Overall, people on probation we consulted with were reasonably positive about their experience of supervision, although those who were interviewed were far more negative. Nevertheless, two thirds of those people surveyed felt happy generally with the service they receive. For many (38 per cent), the relationship they have with their probation practitioner is the best thing about their experience of the service and being on probation:

"It's brilliant. My probation officer is really helpful and nice. She listens and tries to help as much as she can."

It is also encouraging that 65 per cent of respondents feel they have had help accessing services they need, with over two thirds being able to do so within their local area and within a reasonable time:

"Yeah, that's been OK really. I did a health and safety course and I start my CSCS (construction skills certification scheme) course next week which should help me get some site work or something."

"The courses and qualifications are positives for me, I never finished exams at school so this gives me a chance to get a job."

Nevertheless, for others the experience of being on probation is frustrating, with some feeling that it is merely a 'tick-box' exercise and that help is very limited. Similarly, although 76 per cent of people on probation feel that their probation practitioner is flexible with appointments, for others there is frustration that they can sometimes be left waiting around a long time or that there is little flexibility to accommodate work patterns, as one man told us:

"They should be more willing to work around those that have jobs and also make sure that they are on time for appointments because I can only get out of work for so long and if they are late, I am late and then my job is at risk."

For many people on probation, whether they find the experience useful or not, having an influence over their order and even over how the services are delivered is really important and something that in Stafford and Stoke PDU most feel is currently not the case.

Diversity and inclusion

Diversity was managed ostensibly at a regional level. The regional roadmap and associated action plan are detailed and comprehensive. Its implementation is driven through the West Midlands' Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Board as a sub-committee of the West Midlands' Operational leadership team, and it includes representation from Staffordshire and Stoke PDU. The Promoting Inclusion staff mentoring scheme, managed across the region, is a positive initiative and staff from the PDU have been part of the work undertaken.

However, relatively little was being done to develop diversity and inclusion work across the PDU. It is unclear to what extent any groups in the area are disproportionately impacted by services or if individuals protected under The Equality Act are more or less likely to complete orders, be breached or recalled etc. More work regarding this is required.

Appropriate impact assessments have been undertaken in relation to the occupation of all offices and buildings across the PDU, including the two newly refurbished offices due to be reoccupied in July 2022. The staffing profile of the PDU does not equate to the profile of the people on probation. It is hoped that the current PSO recruitment, being managed locally, will increase the potential to better reflect the local community.

Overall, more work to better understand and address issues around equality and diversity is required.

2. Court work and case supervision

We inspected 50 community sentence cases and 29 post-release supervision cases. We inspected 37 relevant court reports arising from those cases. We examined the quality of assessment, planning, implementation and delivery, and reviewing in each case. Each of these elements was inspected in respect of engaging the person on probation and addressing issues relevant to offending and desistance. The quality of work undertaken in relation to each element of case supervision needs to be above a specific threshold for it to be rated as satisfactory. We also inspected the outcomes achieved for people on probation and provide data on these results.

Across all four aspects of case supervision, assessment, planning, implementation and reviewing, we found only a minority of cases met the standard to be judged as sufficient and overall, all four elements were rated as 'Inadequate'. Of particular concern is that, in relation to the assessment and management of risk of serious harm, fewer than half the cases in each section were judged sufficient.

It is encouraging to note that although we had only seven cases in our case sample, those managed by Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) trainees, and by extension supported by their probation officer mentors, were generally of a better standard. While this is encouraging, it should be remembered that these probation practitioners have much smaller caseloads than the average. High workloads (as distinct from high caseloads) may well be a significant factor as, overall, we found the work of probation services officers (whose caseload and workloads are on average higher than other probation practitioners) to be the weakest. Work undertaken with female people on probation was also, broadly, better than the average, particularly in relation to implementation. In this regard, drawing on support from other agencies, in this case the commissioned rehabilitative services' (CRS) Women's team, appears to have positive benefits. Disappointingly, the use of similar support was not widely in evidence elsewhere.

Of some concern is that, with the 13 high and very high risk of harm cases we reviewed, while in most cases assessment and planning was reasonable, in relation to implementation and reviewing, only a minority were assessed as sufficient in relation to risk management. Ostensibly this was due to limited contact with the person on probation and work with other agencies.

It should be noted however that, despite the limitations we have referenced, we saw some extremely well-managed cases during our fieldwork, and some staff are doing a good job. Many staff are new to the service, and many of them have been severely hampered in their development by staff shortages and the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic. Working from home has, for most staff, reduced their opportunities to effectively reflect on their practice, share experiences with others and focus on the key elements of casework. Despite many services being available to support work with people on probation, many staff appear to have lost sight of these important opportunities. Management oversight has also, too often, been lacking along with effective quality assurance input. Leaders need to ensure that effective oversight is consistently available and that those charged with providing it have sufficient time and support to deliver it.

Key data

Case supervision

Strengths:

- The work undertaken overall by PQiP trainees is of a good standard.
- Work undertaken with women is generally good, especially when it draws on support from the women's service.
- Some pre-release work with prisoners is good and when it is, is usually followed by effective case management on licence.

Areas for improvement:

- Casework too often does not focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe.
- In too many cases the nature and frequency of contact with a person on probation is insufficient to reduce desistance or effectively manage risk.
- Management oversight is too infrequent or insufficiently focused to be effective.
- In too many cases there is insufficient liaison with other agencies involved in the case.
- Insufficient use is made of other services, both within and out of the service.

2.1 Court work



The pre-sentence information and advice provided to court supports its decision-making. Inadequate

Our rating⁷ for court work is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against the key question:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Is the pre-sentence information and advice provided to court sufficiently analytical and personalised to the individual, supporting the court's decision-making?	38%

The PDU is rated as 'Inadequate' for court work, with only 38 per cent of cases inspected being rated as satisfactory against our quality standard.

⁷ The rating for the standard is driven by the score for the key question, which is placed in a rating band.

Within our sample of 37 court cases, we saw a number of well-constructed reports, drawing on information, where appropriate, from partner agencies including police, children's services, drug and alcohol misuse service providers. In the vast majority of cases, consideration was given to the individual's diversity and personal circumstances, and their likelihood of reoffending, and in a good number of cases the individual's motivation and readiness to change. In all but one of the cases (97 per cent) the individual was involved meaningfully in the preparation of the report, and their views were considered. The following is an example of how this was brought together in an appropriate analysis and recommendation to the court:

Good practice example

The report author had prepared for the report by requesting police intelligence checks and had liaised with children's services in plenty of time to ensure responses were received prior to the report being presented to the court. The report was personalised to the person on probation (Stephen's) circumstances and the author had asked Stephen for his own reflections on why he had behaved in such a way. The report identified risk factors, and these were addressed appropriately in the recommendation for sentence.

Although our expectation is that a domestic abuse check is undertaken via the police in all cases and that, where there is evidence of children being at risk, checks are undertaken via children's services, their absence is not, *per se*, a barrier to a positive overall evaluation, as in the following case:

Good practice example

This was a short format pre-sentence report. No domestic violence or safeguarding checks were undertaken but this was deemed appropriate given that the person at court was a young single man with no previous convictions, no children and who lives alone. He was meaningfully engaged in the interview process and the report itself was sufficiently analytical and personalised.

However, while in 81 per cent of requests to police for domestic abuse checks and 91 per cent of requests to children's services information was received back, such checks were requested too infrequently. Overall, in too few cases did the information and advice on which the report was based draw on the full range of available information. This was disappointing since in several of the cases we looked at, much of the engagement, analysis and consideration of possible disposals was good but flawed by the lack of, particularly risk-related, information, as in the following example:

Poor practice example

While the report included a good analysis of the offence and underpinning factors, it did not make use of a safeguarding check. The person on probation's index offence was a non-contact sexual offence involving children. As he is assessed as posing a risk to children, safeguarding checks should have been completed. He does not have children living at home (which appears to be the rationale for not completing a check) but has contact with children as part of his wider family.

2.2. Assessment



Assessment is well-informed, analytical and personalised, actively involving the person on probation. Inadequate

Our rating⁸ for assessment is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does assessment focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	62%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on the factors linked to offending and desistance?	62%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	39%

Staffordshire and Stoke Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) is rated as 'Inadequate' for assessment, as the lowest score for the key questions was 39 per cent.

The importance of an effective assessment cannot be overstated; it invariably underpins subsequent work and determines both the focus and nature of engagement. Therefore, the scores in this section almost inevitably drive failings against our other standards. We saw some considerable variations in quality. It is, however, worthy of note that while the sample was relatively small (seven), the quality of assessments undertaken by PQiP trainees was consistently of a good standard across all three of the key questions.

The best assessment we saw were those where the person on probation was engaged in the process, their views were taken into account and their individual circumstances were considered. Furthermore, factors underpinning their offending and desistence were examined, as was consideration of their likely risk to others. To do so requires a full review of available information, and where available and relevant, information held by other agencies. This latter may include providers of services engaged in addressing offending, such as substance misuse agencies, but in relation to assessing risk, the police and children's services.

⁸ The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table.

The following is a good example of where all these factors were pulled together in an effective assessment:

Good practice example

Assessment draws on information from previous records and discussions with Alice both prior to and post release from custody. Analysis focuses on her motivation and barriers to engagement. It also includes an account of Alice's drug use and the impact of this on her capacity to engage.

This analysis further considers likely triggers for negative behaviour and examines how Alice's past abusive experiences at the hands of her ex-partner has resulted in separation from her children and the onset of substance misuse. This experience of loss is considered significant in relation to her lifestyle, accommodation and the financial challenges that Alice continues to face. There is recognition of the fractured, but potentially positive, relationship she has with her mother.

Risk concerns are identified from past offending and the linkage of Alice's presenting drug dependency. Lifestyle challenges to finance drugs are recognised as drivers to potential harmful behaviour. The impact of this is further considered in situations where risk is increased and individuals/groups may be at risk from her behaviour, such as the police during arrest situations. Safeguarding exchanges are undertaken with an understanding that Alice does not have, and is not likely to have, unsupervised or unplanned contact with her children.

Disappointingly, in far too many cases, either safeguarding checks were not undertaken where there was evidence of a potential risk to children, or the information received was not sufficiently taken account of as part of the overall evaluation. In several cases, although some aspects of assessment were reasonable, they were let down by poor consideration of factors relating to risk, such as in the following case example:

Poor practice example

The assessment highlights the motivation and triggers to Michael's offending in great detail. It lists factors linked to desistance and analyses the underlying factors that have led to the commission of the index offence, as well as patterns of behaviour that has led to his offending. The assessment also looks at the period of desistance when highlighting employment and abstinence from class A drugs as key factors.

Although the assessment analyses past offending behaviour patterns and issues in his relationship directly linked to harm, it also references safeguarding checks from 2019, but this has not been updated. Additionally, the assessment fails to consider risk to children, given past social service concerns about substance misuse and domestic violence when the children were present. Furthermore, it fails to consider prison information that notes that, while in prison, Michael was contacting the victim and continued to make contact after the number was blocked, using an alias to continue to harass her.

2.3. Planning



Planning is well-informed, holistic and personalised, actively involving the person on probation. Inadequate

Our rating⁹ for planning is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does planning focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	53%
Does planning focus sufficiently on reducing reoffending and supporting desistance?	53%
Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	46%

The lowest score for the key questions was 46 per cent; this relates to whether planning focuses sufficiently on keeping other people safe. As a result, the score falls within the 'Inadequate' ratings band and the PDU has been rated as 'Inadequate' overall for planning.

Considering our findings in relation to assessment it is not surprising that we also found poor scores across all three key questions in relation to planning. Nevertheless, it is disappointing that in only just over half the cases we reviewed did planning focus sufficient on engaging people on probation, addressing their reoffending or supporting their desistance.

In the better case examples, we saw plans that include an outline of how the person on probation will be motivated and supported to engage; how the work undertaken would be delivered (either by the practitioner or by another partner or agency), over what time; and what would be the indicators of success. Such plans are drawn up in conjunction with the person and probation. In the best cases contingency plans are also considered in anticipation of problems occurring.

Overall, however, and in far too many cases, planning does not focus sufficiently on keeping others safe. Given the emphasis by the PDU (and region) on the importance of managing risk of harm, this was of particular concern. In too many cases planning does not fully consider the likely risk the individual poses. Even when factors relating to risk are considered, and in some cases built into the plan, there is a significant absence of effective contingency planning should the current situation change.

Although engagement with people on probation assessed as high or very high risk of harm was concerningly weak in many aspects of casework, in regard to risk

⁹ The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table.

management planning, some cases were managed well. The following was described by the case assessor as an 'outstanding example of risk management':

Good practice example

Sean is a 34-year-old white male who was sentenced to six months custody for criminal damage which was committed on a train while under the influence of substances. He was initially released on licence to approved premises but was recalled after failing to comply with his curfew and reverting to drug misuse. Prior to his subsequent release the probation practitioner set up a video-link to discuss the recall with Sean. He was a MAPPA (multi-agency public protection arrangements) level 2 case (active multi-agency management).

Sean attributed his poor compliance leading up to recall to a deterioration in mental health and the use of substances to deal with this. There was planning around alcohol work available in custody as well as liaison by the probation practitioner with safer custody (in custody), requesting welfare checks when his mood appeared low along with discussions about his willingness to work with a substance misuse agency on release.

Sean was managed as a MAPPA category 3 case (other dangerous offender) and the probation practitioner was able to secure a return to an approved premise, despite the previous breach. This demonstrated considerable tenacity on the part of the probation practitioner. She also organised professionals' meetings in between MAPPA to share information and coordinate services.

A 'trigger plan' was put together, led by police, to protect his now ex-partner. There were clear action points and contingency planning around Sean's likely disengagement and welfare checks on the potential victim.

2.4. Implementation and delivery



High-quality well-focused, personalised and coordinated services are delivered, engaging the person on probation. Inadequate

Our rating¹⁰ for implementation and delivery is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions:

¹⁰ The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table.

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Is the sentence or post-custody period implemented effectively with a focus on engaging the person on probation?	58%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support desistance?	42%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?	37%

Staffordshire and Stoke PDU is rated as 'Inadequate' for implementation and delivery, as the lowest score for the key questions was 37 per cent for the implementation and delivery of services which effectively support the safety of other people and only 42 per cent for the implementation and delivery of services that effectively support the person on probation's desistance, both of which fall within the rating band for 'Inadequate'.

Although the highest key question score in this section relates to the effective implementation of the post-custody period or sentence and engagement of the person on probation, this was still only assessed as being sufficient in a little over half the cases we reviewed.

Staff across the PDU have been through a lot in the 12 months following unification; with the significant reorganisation of teams, the continued fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic, pressures on staff numbers and high workloads. The lack of contact we saw in many cases with people on probation might, in part at least, be indicative of some of these pressures. In 28 out of 69 cases we found the level and nature of contact was insufficient to reduce reoffending and support desistance. Similarly, we found that in 29 out of 74 cases the level of contact was deemed insufficient to manage and minimise the risk of harm. Furthermore, in only 23 per cent of the cases we reviewed did we determine that home visits were undertaken sufficiently to support the effective management of risk of harm.

Leaders have drawn on the prioritising probation framework and 'National standards lite' delivery model in an attempt to reduce some of these pressures for staff while still maintaining an appropriate emphasis upon managing risk. In this regard, drawing on partner agencies to support implementation and the use of CRS and structured interventions provided by the service are ideal opportunities to reduce pressures further. We found, for instance, that in the small number of cases regarding women on probation (eight) this was indeed the case, with six of the cases drawing on support and engagement from the women's CRS service. However, such an approach was less well evidenced elsewhere. As an example, the introduction of structured interventions via the Programme team saw only 11 referrals across all four courses in the weeks running up to their planned implementation in the middle of June. Overall, in 38 out of 66 relevant cases we reviewed, we determined that there was insufficient coordination with other agencies in implementing services. Further, we determined that there was insufficient coordination in 35 out of 64 cases in assessing the risk of harm to the person on probation.

The following example is taken from a case assessed as high risk of harm:

Poor practice example

George is a 57-year-old man who was convicted of possession of a firearm. He received a 12-month prison sentence and a 10-year restraining order prohibiting contact with his wife and son, the victims of the offence.

On George's release from prison, the probation practitioner did not complete an assessment of suitability when he moved in with an alleged former partner (prior to his wife), despite the nature of his offence, as he said they were now 'just friends'. Help was wanted with accommodation and mental health. It was also correctly identified that a variety of work relating to his offence was required. However, there were no referrals made to programmes or CRS. Neither were there any interventions delivered by the probation practitioner. Although George was initially seen weekly in line with risk, this dropped to fortnightly after a few months, even though no offence-focused work had been delivered and his mental health was deteriorating.

2.5. Reviewing



Reviewing of progress is well-informed, analytical and personalised, actively involving the person on probation. Inadequate

Our rating¹¹ for reviewing is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting the compliance and engagement of the person on probation?	57%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting desistance?	51%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	46%

Fewer than half the cases we inspected were satisfactory in relation to whether case reviews focused sufficiently on keeping other people safe. Therefore, we have rated the quality of reviewing overall as 'Inadequate'.

It is expected that a case is reviewed following a significant event or after six months. This might include a new responsible probation practitioner, or it might include a change of circumstances for the person on probation, including a further

¹¹ The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table.

offence, alcohol or drug misuse relapse, new information coming to light or a new personal relationship being entered into, to name but a few.

In too many cases reviews did not occur, either formally through, for instance, the Offender Assessment System, or informally through supervision. Given the insufficient level of contact we found in too many cases and the lack of engagement with other agencies, particularly in relation to managing risk to others, it is not surprising that this was subsequently reflected in the paucity of effective reviewing.

In some of the cases we reviewed we found an overreliance by the probation practitioner of the person on probation's self-reporting which too often was not verified or sufficiently challenged. Similarly, some cases we reviewed demonstrated a lack of professional curiosity, resulting in gaps in knowledge about important aspects of the case. As a consequence, on occasions, even when a review did take place, it was erroneously informed and consequently rendered ineffective.

2.6. Outcomes

Early outcomes are positive, demonstrating reasonable progress for the person on probation.

Outcomes	Percentage 'Yes'
Do early outcomes demonstrate that reasonable progress has been made, in line with the personalised needs of the person on probation?	35%

We do not currently rate the Outcomes standard but provide this data for information and benchmarking purposes only. Given the number of cases where we assessed the level of contact by the probation practitioner with the person on probation to be insufficient to reduce reoffending and support desistance or to manage the risk of harm (see page 29), appropriate interventions are unlikely to be consistently implemented, as we also found, and therefore good outcomes are unlikely to be forthcoming.

Given staff shortages and associated work pressures, continued recovery from Covid-19 and the unification of the service only a year prior to this inspection, some of these limitations might be expected. However, it is evident that in some cases probation practitioners have worked hard to effectively engage people on probation, to work with other agencies to facilitate appropriate support and to ensure access to programmes delivered through either the service's own programme team or CRS. As an example, in 12 of the cases we reviewed sufficient work relating to employment had been undertaken to address strengths and protective factors. Similarly, sufficient accommodation support was delivered in 10 cases where it was identified as being necessary to address the management of risk.

Overall, however, the outcomes of work in relation to the management of risk was lacking. In only 10 of 29 cases (34 per cent) was sufficient work delivered to address safeguarding concern and in only nine of 33 cases (27 per cent) was sufficient work delivered to address domestic abuse concerns.

Annexe one – Progress against previous recommendations

HM Inspectorate of Probation have made recommendations for the previous Community Rehabilitation Companies and National Probation Service divisions, arising from core and thematic inspections. Since the unification of probation services, we have expected The Probation Service to continue to implement these recommendations. Below are our findings from the inspection of Staffordshire and Stoke Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) in respect of the relevant recommendations:

Recommendation from Staffordshire & West Midlands Community Rehabilitation Company report 19 December 2018:

Improve the quality of assessment, planning, service delivery and reviewing, to help keep actual and potential victims safe. [This recommendation has been repeated from the previous inspection.]

Inspection findings:

Despite efforts at both a regional and PDU level to improve the quality of this work, cases we reviewed remain inconsistent and overall were rated as 'Inadequate'.

Categorisation **No progress**

Improvement still required? **Yes**

Recommendation from Staffordshire & West Midlands Community Rehabilitation Company report 19 December 2018:

Equip all staff with the skills and knowledge necessary to carry out effective work to keep other people safe. [This recommendation has been repeated from the previous inspection.]

Inspection findings:

Despite 30 out of 38 respondents in our staff survey indicating that they were allocated cases for which they have the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience, this was not reflected consistently in our case reviews. In too many cases probation practitioners were unclear about action they needed to take, especially in relation to keeping other people safe.

Categorisation **No progress**

Improvement still required? **Yes**

Recommendation from Staffordshire & West Midlands Community Rehabilitation Company report 19 December 2018:

Address high levels of sickness absence and staff concerns about health and safety. [This recommendation was repeated from the previous inspection.]

Inspection findings:

Staffordshire and Stoke continue to experience high levels of sickness.

At our last inspection, in November 2019, sickness levels (average days lost per employee) averaged almost 16 days. Data received from the PDU during this

most recent inspection suggests that since unification the level rose to a peak during December 2021 and January 2022 of 21.1 days and 22.5 days. By April 2022 the rolling average per month had reduced slightly to 17.6, with a month average of 9.8 but still remained above the target of nine days.

Categorisation **No progress**

Improvement still required? **Yes**

Recommendation from Staffordshire & West Midlands Community Rehabilitation Company report 19 December 2018:

Develop and implement a clear and consistent approach to the middle manager role in improving public protection practice and the overall quality of case management.

Inspection findings:

There is an acknowledgement by senior leaders at both a regional and PDU level that middle managers, especially senior probation officers, are under considerable pressure due to high caseloads and shortages of staff. Nevertheless, some still feel occasionally overwhelmed by the demands placed upon them. In only 25 per cent of the cases we reviewed did we assess that sufficient management oversight was in place.

Categorisation **No progress**

Improvement still required? **Yes**

Recommendation from Staffordshire & West Midlands Community Rehabilitation Company report 19 December 2018:

Integrate improved administration capacity into the operational delivery teams.

Inspection findings:

Many administrative staff we spoke to during the inspection told us that they often feel overwhelmed by the new range of activities they are responsible for since unification.

Across the PDU, at the time of this inspection, there were 6.54 administrative vacancies (against the most recent target operating model) equating to a vacancy rate of 17 per cent.

Categorisation **Some progress**

Improvement still required? **No**

Recommendation from Midlands division of the National Probation Service 18 December 2018:

Take further steps to balance workloads across local delivery units and between probation officers and probation service officers.

Inspection findings:

Across the PDU average caseloads are 33.7 for probation officers (compared with 39.4 at the point of unification) and 44.9 for probation services officers (compared

with 54.3 at the point of unification). In our survey 27 out of 38 staff said they had caseloads of less than 40. Despite this, only 11 out of 38 said their caseloads were manageable, compared with around a third at the last inspection, with many citing the complexities of cases and low staffing levels as the main causes.

There is presently a 26 per cent deficit of probation services officers and a shortfall of almost 17 per cent of probation officers.

Categorisation **No progress**

Improvement still required? **Yes**

**Recommendation from Midlands division of the National Probation Service
18 December 2018:**

Ensure that interventions provided to offenders are used consistently across the division.

Inspection findings:

The provision of accredited programmes to both those convicted of a sexual and non-sexual offence are appropriate and have largely recovered from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Access to commissioned rehabilitative services (CRS) remain variable but are slowly improving.

Although only recently introduced, access to structured interventions remains disappointingly low.

Categorisation **No progress**

Improvement still required? **Yes**

**Recommendation from Midlands division of the National Probation Service
18 December 2018:**

Ensure that risk management plans are reviewed in response to changes in risk of harm.

Inspection findings:

From a review of our cases, a disappointing number of risk management plans were reviewed sufficiently comprehensively or frequently to meet the needs of the individual case.

Categorisation **Sufficient progress**

Improvement still required? **No**

**Recommendation from Midlands division of the National Probation Service
18 December 2018:**

Keep the progress of supervision under review, updating sentence plans where appropriate.

Inspection findings:

In our case supervision review we found that in 21 out of fifty cases where a written review was required as a formal record of actions to implement the sentence it had

not taken place. Overall, work in relation to casework reviewing was assessed as 'Inadequate'.

Categorisation **No progress**

Improvement still required? **Yes**

**Recommendation from Midlands division of the National Probation Service
18 December 2018:**

Ensure that initial contact with individuals who have been affected by specified crimes encourages their engagement with the victim contact scheme.

Inspection findings:

In a number of cases we reviewed we saw evidence of appropriate referrals to the victim contact unit.

Categorisation **Sufficient progress**

Improvement still required? **No**

**Recommendation from Midlands division of the National Probation Service
18 December 2018:**

Ensure that probation facilities are well maintained and provide a safe environment for work with offenders.

Inspection findings:

Overall, the quality of probation facilities across Staffordshire and Stoke PDU are well maintained. Two offices have recently been refurbished. The office at Stafford was due to be reoccupied the week following our inspection fieldwork and the office in Tamworth in mid-July 2022.

22 out of 38 respondents in our survey felt that sufficient attention was paid to their safety. Many of those who did not feel this to be the case indicated frustration at the current refurbishment timescale.

Categorisation **Sufficient progress**

Improvement still required? **No**

Annexe two – Staffing and workload data

Data in this section is largely provided by The Probation Service. We cannot confirm its reliability, although where possible it has been verified using internal workforce planning information.

Key staffing data¹²

Total staff headcount (full-time equivalent) (FTE)	233
Total number of senior probation officers (SPOs)	15
Total number of probation officers (POs) (FTE)	74
Total number of probation service officers (PSOs) (FTE)	90
Vacancy rate (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total staff headcount)	Not available
Vacancy rate of SPO grade only (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total number of required SPO posts)	0%
Vacancy rate of PO grade only (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total number of required PO posts)	16.6%
Vacancy rate of PSO grade only (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total number of required PSO posts)	26%
Sickness absence rate (average days lost in previous 12 months for all staff)	17.6
Staff attrition (percentage of all staff leaving in 12-month period)	9%
Staff attrition SPO grade only (percentage of all SPO-grade staff leaving in 12-month period)	Not available
Staff attrition PO grade only (percentage of all PO-grade staff leaving in 12-month period)	3%
Staff attrition PSO grade only (percentage of all PSO-grade staff leaving in 12-month period)	13%

¹² Data supplied by The Probation Service.

Caseload and workload data¹²

Average caseload per PO (FTE)	33.7
Average caseload per PSO (FTE)	44.9
Workload management tool (WMT) average per PO	116%
WMT average per PSO	85%

Inspection workload data¹³

Proportion of probation practitioners in this PDU describing workload as unmanageable	43%
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¹³ HM Inspectorate of Probation inspection data.

Annexe three – Inspection data

In this section, questions marked * do not apply in unpaid work only cases, and questions marked ** do not apply in every case. Only the positive answers are reported in these tables, which do not include cases where the question is not applicable.

2.1 Court work	% "Yes"
Is the pre-sentence information and advice provided to court sufficiently analytical and personalised to the individual, supporting the court's decision-making?¹⁴	
Does the information and advice draw sufficiently on available sources of information including child safeguarding and domestic abuse information?	30%
Is the individual meaningfully involved in the preparation of the report, and are their views considered?	97%
Does the advice consider factors related to the likelihood of reoffending?	86%
Does the advice consider factors related to risk of harm? **	78%
Does the advice consider the individual's motivation and readiness to change?	78%
Does the advice consider the individual's diversity and personal circumstances?	89%
Does the advice consider the impact of the offence on known or identifiable victims?	68%
Is an appropriate proposal made to court? **	92%
Is there a sufficient record of the advice given, and the reasons for it?	97%

Questions marked ** do not apply in every case. Only positive answers are reported in this data.

2.2. Assessment	% "Yes"
Does assessment focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	
Does assessment analyse the motivation and readiness of the person on probation to engage and comply with the sentence?	67%
Does assessment analyse the protected characteristics of the individual and consider the impact these have on their ability to comply and engage with service delivery?	54%
Does assessment analyse the personal circumstances of the individual, and consider the impact these have on their ability to comply and engage with service delivery?	67%
Is the person on probation meaningfully involved in their assessment, and are their views taken into account?	61%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on the factors linked to offending and desistance?	
Does assessment identify and analyse offending-related factors?	70%
Does assessment identify the strengths and protective factors of the person on probation? **	51%
Does assessment draw sufficiently on available sources of information?	62%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	
Does assessment clearly identify and analyse any risk of harm to others, including identifying who is at risk and the nature of that risk?	48%
Does assessment draw sufficiently on available sources of information, including past behaviour and convictions, and involve other agencies where appropriate?	46%
Does assessment analyse any specific concerns and risks related to actual and potential victims? **	46%

2.3. Planning	% "Yes"
Does planning focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	
Is the person on probation meaningfully involved in planning, and are their views taken into account?	53%
Does planning take sufficient account of the diversity factors of the individual which may affect engagement and compliance? **	48%
Does planning take sufficient account of the personal circumstances of the individual which may affect engagement and compliance? **	61%
Does planning take sufficient account of the readiness and motivation of the person on probation to change which may affect engagement and compliance?	62%
Does planning set out how all the requirements of the sentence or licence/post-sentence supervision will be delivered within the available timescales?	41%
Does planning set a level, pattern and type of contact sufficient to engage the individual and to support the effectiveness of specific interventions?	66%
Does planning focus sufficiently on reducing reoffending and supporting desistance?	
Does planning sufficiently reflect offending-related factors and prioritise those which are most critical? *	61%
Does planning build on the individual's strengths and protective factors, utilising potential sources of support? **	48%
Does planning set out the services most likely to reduce reoffending and support desistance?	56%

Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	
Does planning sufficiently address risk of harm factors and prioritise those which are most critical? **	49%
Does planning set out the necessary constructive and/or restrictive interventions to manage the risk of harm? **	44%
Does planning make appropriate links to the work of other agencies involved with the person on probation and any multi-agency plans? **	43%
Does planning set out necessary and effective contingency arrangements to manage those risks that have been identified? **	46%

2.4 Implementation and delivery	% "Yes"
Is the sentence or post-custody period implemented effectively with a focus on engaging the person on probation?	
Do the requirements of the sentence start promptly, or at an appropriate time?	54%
Is sufficient focus given to maintaining an effective working relationship with the person on probation, taking into account their diversity needs?	65%
Are sufficient efforts made to enable the individual to complete their sentence, including flexibility to take appropriate account of their personal circumstances?	87%
Are risks of non-compliance identified and addressed in a timely fashion to reduce the need for enforcement actions? **	53%
Are enforcement actions taken when appropriate? **	42%
Are sufficient efforts made to re-engage the individual after enforcement actions or recall? **	41%

Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support desistance?	
Are the delivered services those most likely to reduce reoffending and support desistance, with sufficient attention given to sequencing and the available timescales?	38%
Wherever possible, does the delivery of services build upon the individual's strengths and enhance protective factors? **	38%
Is the involvement of other organisations in the delivery of services sufficiently well-coordinated? * **	35%
Are key individuals in the life of the person on probation engaged where appropriate to support their desistance? * **	29%
Is the level and nature of contact sufficient to reduce reoffending and support desistance?	52%
Are local services engaged to support and sustain desistance during the sentence and beyond? * **	33%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?	
Is the level and nature of contact offered sufficient to manage and minimise the risk of harm? **	57%
Is sufficient attention given to protecting actual and potential victims? **	47%
Is the involvement of other agencies in managing and minimising the risk of harm sufficiently well-coordinated? * **	37%
Are key individuals in the life of the person on probation engaged where appropriate to support the effective management of risk of harm? * **	23%
Are home visits undertaken where necessary to support the effective management of risk of harm? * **	23%

Prompts relevant to post-custody cases only:	
Post-custody cases only: Did the community offender manager ensure a proportionate level of contact with the prisoner before release?	18%
Post-custody cases only: Did the community offender manager address the key resettlement or desistance needs before release?	21%
Post-custody cases only: Did the community offender manager address key risk of harm needs before release?	15%

2.5 Reviewing	% "Yes"
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting the compliance and engagement of the person on probation?	
Does reviewing consider compliance and engagement levels and any relevant barriers, with the necessary adjustments being made to the ongoing plan of work? **	54%
Is the person on probation meaningfully involved in reviewing their progress and engagement?	43%
Are written reviews completed as appropriate as a formal record of actions to implement the sentence? **	49%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting desistance?	
Does reviewing identify and address changes in factors linked to offending behaviour, with the necessary adjustments being made to the ongoing plan of work? *	44%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on building on the strengths and enhancing the protective factors of the person on probation? **	42%
Is reviewing informed by the necessary input from other agencies working with the person on probation? **	29%
Are written reviews completed as appropriate as a formal record of the progress towards desistance? **	44%

Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	
Does reviewing identify and address changes in factors related to risk of harm, with the necessary adjustments being made to the ongoing plan of work? **	34%
Is reviewing informed by the necessary input from other agencies involved in managing the risk of harm? **	37%
Is the person on probation (and, where appropriate, are key individuals in their life) meaningfully involved in reviewing the risk of harm? * **	36%
Are written reviews completed as appropriate as a formal record of the management of the risk of harm? **	41%

2.6 Outcomes	% "Yes"
Do early outcomes demonstrate that reasonable progress has been made, in line with the personalised needs of the person on probation?	
Have there been improvements in those factors most closely linked to offending both in developing strengths and addressing needs?	29%
Has there been a reduction in factors most closely related to risk of harm to others? **	22%
Has there been a reduction in offending?	15%

Annexe four – Web links

Further information about the methodology used to conduct this inspection is available on our website, using the following link:

[Our work \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)

A glossary of terms used in this report is available on our website, using the following link:

[Glossary \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)