HM Inspectorate
of Probation

Frontline leadership in probation and youth justice

HM Inspectorate of Probation

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

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Executive summary

Context

Research indicates that having managers with strong people skills leads to greater staff motivation and personal wellbeing (CIPD, 2023). Furthermore, employee job satisfaction is overwhelmingly driven by the quality of the relationship with managers (McKinsey, 2023), with beneficial staff outcomes positively related to the supervisory dimensions of task assistance, social and emotional support, and supervisory interpersonal interaction (Mor Barak et al., 2009). The supervisor/supervisee relationship has also been found to be more important to satisfaction and wellbeing at work than co-worker relationships. In turn, high levels of employee satisfaction and engagement drive up productivity and staff retention (Krekel, Ward and de Neve, 2019), with further research finding a relationship between staff turnover rates and organisational performance (Park and Shaw, 2013).

As such, operational middle managers in probation and youth justice services – the frontline leaders – need to be able to focus upon leading, inspiring, and developing their teams to bring out the best in practitioners, in turn supporting the aims of reducing reoffending and protecting the public.
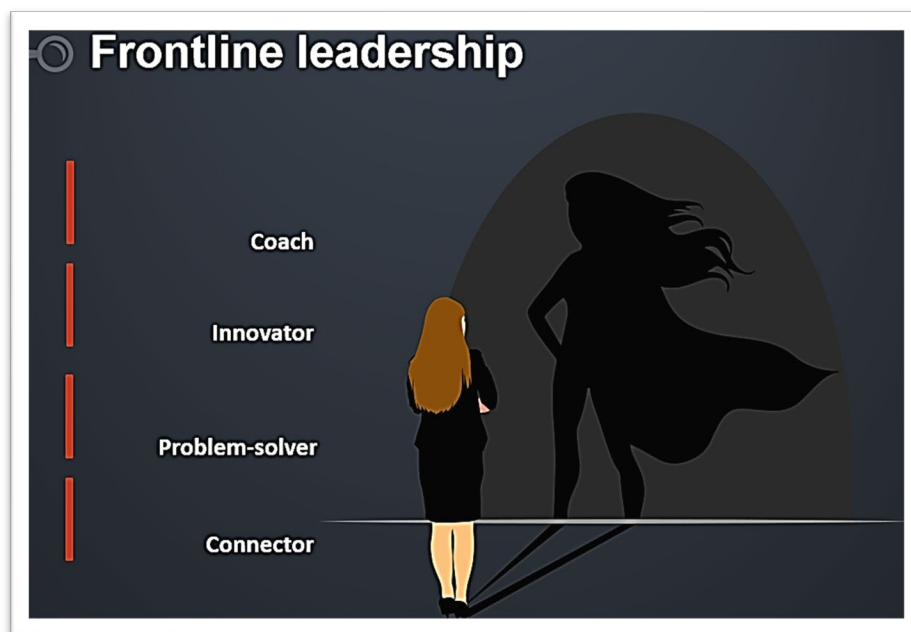
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Approach

The findings in this bulletin are based upon multiple sources. We analysed the data collected from our inspections of youth justice and probation services (July 2021 to May 2023), and the associated commentaries by inspectors in relation to individual cases. We also analysed reports by HM Prison and Probation Services (HMPPS), the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and Ministry of Justice (MoJ), as well as the feedback from a survey of Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) undertaken for the thematic inspection of the SPO role and management oversight (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024). Finally, the report draws upon a realist review of the subject commissioned from the Policy Evaluation and Research Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University (Fox et al., 2024).

Key findings and implications

- We found that probation and youth justice supervision was much more likely to be deemed effective when the management oversight had also been found to be effective and appropriate.

- Across probation inspections, only 28 per cent of cases were deemed to have received sufficient management oversight. Results were much better for inspections of youth justice services (YJSs); there was deemed to be sufficient management oversight in 59 per cent of court disposal cases and 63 per cent of out-of-court cases. YJSs appear to benefit from more manageable caseload sizes and a stronger local focus with better integration and connections across helping services.

- The research literature and the probation SPO survey identified several underpinning foundations for effective management oversight including:
  - sufficient induction and ongoing training
  - appropriate administrative and business support
  - regular and meaningful supervision with team members
  - a responsive management style.

- Inspector commentaries highlighted the importance of making time for reflective practice supervision as a key component of effective management oversight. However, SPOs were concerned that bureaucratic demands undermined their ability to find the time for such supervision with team members. Our survey of SPOs found considerable resentment at having too broad a range of tasks which distracted them from delivering core probation work.

- The issues of role conflict, role ambiguity and role creep are common for middle managers in many other sectors. Some organisations have been able to rescue their frontline leaders from 'administrivia' through refocusing their role on essential operational work.

- Building upon the findings in this bulletin, the following potential approaches for improving frontline leadership are set out:
  - improving induction and training
  - improving administrative support and staff deployment
  - committing to reflective practice as a key component of a learning culture
  - adopting the role of 'connecting leaders'
  - reintroducing the senior practitioner role in probation
  - considering self-managing teams.

- More generally, consideration needs to be given to the optimum organisational culture and the supporting leadership behaviours and operational delivery structures. If we want staff to be professionally curious and adopt a growth mindset, continually looking for ways to develop and improve, then providing the time and space for reflective practice supervision as part of a wider learning culture is critical.

- In recent years, greater attention has been given to transformational leadership and the benefits at the organisational, team and individual levels from leaders encouraging, inspiring and motivating colleagues to create meaningful change. Ways of promoting and incentivising such transactional leadership behaviours should thus be considered, encouraging a focus upon people rather than tasks and the building of trust and strong two-way interpersonal relationships, facilitated through an open, supportive and safe environment.

1. Introduction

This bulletin focuses upon effective frontline leadership across probation and youth justice services. While leadership is a contested term, one straightforward definition is as follows: 'Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal' (Northouse, 2022, p. 6). Alternatively, Pendleton and Furnham (2016, p. xxi) define leadership as creating 'the conditions for people to thrive, individually and collectively, and achieve significant goals'. They also highlight five key enablers of leadership – inspire, focus, enable, reinforce, learn.

The HMPPS Leadership Code (2022) sets out the following eight standards of what good leadership looks like:

The Leadership Code encourages leaders – remembering that staff at all levels can and should be leaders – to be authentic, credible, and ethical. Leadership is a social process; it is not about instructing others – good leaders work with colleagues in a respectful, values-driven, and collaborative style. The building of positive relationships is at the core of this work, with leaders spending time to listen, understand and connect, helping to build a positive culture and a shared vision, while also inspiring and building confidence in individual practitioners (Hands and Lewis, 2023). The importance of such approaches is further highlighted through the five commitments of Optimistic Leaders, developed by Leading for Children (Jablon, 2018) – there is a focus on the importance of healthy, trusting and

productive relationships within and across all roles and settings, with regular two-way communication being seen as key to maintaining these positive relationships.

For our purposes, *frontline leadership* in probation and youth justice refers to the complex and multi-faceted role of middle managers in supervising, coaching, and guiding their teams of practitioners in managing their caseloads, supporting the aims of reducing reoffending and protecting the public. A conceptual distinction is often made in the literature between management and leadership (see, for example, Kotter, 1990; Kotterman, 2006; Young and Dulewiscz, 2005), with the former concerned with activities like planning and budgeting, organising and staffing, controlling and problem-solving, and the latter focused on establishing vision and direction, aligning people, motivating and mentoring, and leading change. While this report addresses aspects of effective management, there is a greater alignment with what the literature defines as 'leadership'.

In the adult probation world, in sentence management, frontline leadership is largely undertaken by SPOs. Youth justice is a more varied landscape; frontline management in YJSs can be undertaken by YJS managers, team leaders, or senior caseworkers. In specialised justice services, such as interventions provision or approved premises, various arrangements exist to provide staff supervision and service management. This bulletin will largely focus upon those providing frontline leadership in community sentence management.

Supervision has been described in terms of an 'ongoing professional relationship between two and more staff members with different levels of knowledge or expertise, to support professional development and to enhance knowledge and skills' (Rothwell et al., 2021). Within community justice services, two important and related concepts are bound up within the concept of effective management. These are usefully outlined by HMPPS (2022, p. 1) as follows:

Management oversight	**Reflective practice supervision**
The process by which a manager assures themselves that operational delivery is undertaken consistently and to the standards required, and includes coaching and feedback and professional responsibility to enable continuous improvement. It contributes to the supervisory agendas of both accountability and staff development.	A formal process of facilitated reflection on cases within regular planned 1:1 sessions between the practitioner and their line manager. It is a person-centred approach to provide protected time for reflection by practitioners on their most challenging and complex cases, in support of their ongoing professional development.

The sentence management in the community policy framework (MoJ and HMPPS, 2023) states that reflection, professional discussion, and appropriate oversight should all take place as part of a holistic approach to sentence management. In terms of reflective supervision, there is evidence that it can deliver the following positive benefits (Thompson and Gilbert, 2019):

- higher standards of practice
- higher levels of morale, engagement and productivity
- higher levels of confidence
- continuous learning, creating greater opportunities for ongoing improvement
- reduced anxiety and fewer mistakes
- a better working environment to retain existing staff and attract new ones
- a stronger sense of professionalism.

The research evidence further shows that when staff make progress towards goals that matter to them, they feel more engaged and motivated. Reflective recognition can thus be helpful in providing insights into what matters most to staff while also helping them to stop and reflect on their achievements, how they have addressed challenges, and how they have made progress.

However, it has also been found, across organisations and sectors, that there is often friction between the professional development and managerial enforcement roles of middle managers. Corporate imperatives, such as performance targets or ensuring conformity with standard processes, can conflict with professional imperatives around the quality of practice and ensuring that the work with individuals is personalised and relevant.

It is vital that probation and youth justice middle managers have the time and capacity to focus upon professional practice and ensure good quality staff supervision. Insufficient management oversight and inadequate work quality have often contributed to the failings identified in inquiries into serious further offences in probation services (see, for example, HMI Inspectorate of Probation, 2023e) and serious case reviews in children's services. At the same time, it must be recognised that systemic problems such as understaffing in many

areas and functions, high caseloads, lack of communication and miscommunication between agencies, and many other issues also feature prominently in such tragic cases.

Coley (2020) found in his reading of *Probation Journal* articles from the 1960s onwards that supervision in probation has long been a problematic area. For example, in the 1980s, Davies (1984, cited in Coley, ibid) found that staff/manager 1:1 sessions were too 'congested' to allow time for reflective practice supervision. Coley's own research in a former Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) found that probation officers were concerned that management oversight focused upon processes and targets rather than professional guidance and development. The SPO role was subject to too many competing pressures and to the role conflicts of human resources (HR) administration, performance targets, and general staff supervision. SPOs believed that the quality development officer (QDO), which at that time was being developed in some National Probation Service (NPS) divisions[1] (and in this CRC), could help mitigate the lack of case-focused reflective practice. However, the QDO approach could remove from SPOs an enjoyable and engaging part of the job, leaving them with the more mundane and routine management tasks. Moreover, probation officers valued case-focused discussions with their line manager and team leader – the SPO – and wanted more time with them for such discussions.

The evaluation of the *Skills for Effective Engagement and Development and Supervision* (SEEDS) initiative (Westaby et al., 2022) also noted substantial ambiguity in the SPO role, which is particularly concerning bearing in mind the evidence from leadership behaviour research that one of the most important behaviours is clarifying roles (Yukl, Gordon and Taber, 2002). Although SPOs supported the promotion of reflective supervision through SEEDS2, the workload pressures stemming from the wide remit of the SPO role meant that there was little time for this in practice. In addition, there was insufficient training for SPOs and probation workers in how to implement reflective practice, nor enough senior leader commitment to the initiative. Above all, there was a lack of clarity about what probation leaders wanted from SPOs. The researchers suggested considering a reimagination of the SPO role as a senior practitioner role and moving the more routine parts of line management to a purely administrative role.

Tidmarsh (2022) has outlined some of the challenges facing the Probation Service as it moves towards registration and professionalisation of probation officers. However, this is also seen as an opportune time to reimagine probation work as restorative practice co-produced with people on probation and communities. Probation officers will continue to be ultimately responsible for managing risk of harm and vulnerability, and management oversight (perhaps deploying reflective practice) will continue to be an essential element of successful probation work.

Finally, it is helpful to note the Council of European Probation Rules (2010) and associated guidance on managing probation services. This is a useful benchmark for both probation and youth justice senior leaders when considering the organisation of operational management.

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[1] The HMPPS Target Operating Model stated that QDOs would be appointed in every probation division, with a remit for probation officer development, coaching, quality assurance and for relaunching the Skills for Effective Engagement and Development and Supervision (SEEDS) initiative.

30. The management shall ensure the quality of probation work by providing leadership, guidance, supervision and motivation to staff. Staff shall be accountable for their practice.

It is essential that management staff provide leadership and guidance. Regular meetings between individual members of staff and their line managers should take place for supervision/detailed case discussion. They also allow the line manager to consider what the organisation needs to do to support staff in what is often extremely demanding and complex work. This includes encouragement, motivation, professional development and responsiveness to staff concerns, including by way of team counselling and case conferences. Staff can only perform to the expected standards when appropriately supported and where the organisation is well-ordered and well-managed.

We should note that frontline leadership in youth justice is an under-researched area and features rarely in the literature. We shall try to somewhat redress the balance in this paper with inspection data and inspector commentary.

Inspection standards

Our current inspections of youth justice and probation services are underpinned by standards which are grounded in evidence, learning and experience. In developing the standards, we worked constructively with providers and partners to build a common view of high-quality services and what should be expected.

We have published a probation staffing standard which includes a focus upon management oversight. The standard emphasises the importance of enabling frontline leaders to provide effective supervision and management oversight for practitioners[2]. Similar themes are extant in our youth justice standards, which are under review at the time of writing.

Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) standards

P 1.2 Staffing

P1.2.3 Does the oversight of work support high-quality delivery and professional development?

   a) Is an effective induction programme delivered to new staff that addresses issues of diversity and is accessible to all?

   b) Do staff receive effective case-focused supervision that enhances and sustains the quality of work with people on probation?

   c) Are there effective management oversight arrangements that enhance and sustain the quality of work with people on probation?

   d) Is the appraisal process used effectively to ensure that staff are delivering a high-quality service?

   e) Are the learning needs of staff identified and met?

   f) Is poor staff performance identified and addressed?

   g) g) Is a culture of learning and continuous improvement promoted actively?

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[2] The full standards framework can be found here: https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/about-our-work/our-standards-and-ratings/.

2. Findings

The findings presented in this bulletin are based upon an analysis of several sources (see Annex A for further detail):

(i) aggregated case assessment data from probation inspections (1,550 cases) and youth justice inspections (536 court disposals and 769 out-of-court disposals), and the accompanying case commentaries from inspectors

(ii) a survey of SPOs in the Probation Service (392 responses) conducted to support our thematic inspection of the SPO role and management oversight (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024)

(iii) an analysis of official policy documents including YJB, HMPPS and MoJ material

(iv) a commissioned realist review[3] of the evidence base by Manchester Metropolitan University (Fox et al., 2024).

Four major themes emerged from the analysis of these sources:

- the critical importance of effective **management oversight** by probation and youth justice frontline leaders to support practitioners in relation to individual cases

- the emerging role of **reflective supervision** in improving professional practice

- the dangers from **role drift, role conflict, and role ambiguity** in creating unmanageable workloads for frontline leaders, and in distracting them from essential work with too many non-operational tasks

- more optimistically, the evidence from multiple sources suggests there are **potential solutions** to the barriers to effective frontline leadership in the worlds of probation and youth justice.

2.1 Management oversight and the quality of supervision

Management oversight by frontline leaders is crucial to ensuring safe and effective practice in community justice supervision. In probation, the Touch Points Model (HMPPS, 2021) provides managers with a framework for management oversight in relation to operational delivery. Touch Points set minimum requirements for management oversight across probation functions, including a requirement that all cases should receive a Touch Point discussion and subsequent record of discussion within three weeks of commencement. Following that initial Touch Point, the model specifies minimum requirements for various types of case, including prison release and lifers.

An internal HMPPS review of Touch Points in March 2023 recommended that the model should be decommissioned, and an alternative approach developed to ensure effective management oversight. The Managerial Role Review (2022) found that Touchpoints had exacerbated SPO anxiety about making mistakes, and led to micromanagement of processes rather than a focus upon the quality of management oversight. At the time of writing, the model was still in place.

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[3] "Realist review is an interpretative, theory-driven approach that permits the synthesis of an array of evidence types including qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods research." (Haines-Delmont et al., 2022)

No such prescription exists in the youth justice sphere. The YJB provides a non-mandatory paid course for frontline leaders (comprised of self-reflective exercises, experiential workshops, peer buddy sessions, and distance learning activities) through the Youth Justice Sector Improvement Partnership, as well as examples of management policies by certain YJSs. However, the YJB's remit is to guide and fund YJSs, not to set the detailed policies of these local authority services.

Analysis of our aggregated inspection data for both probation and youth justice indicates that where inspectors deemed management oversight by frontline leaders to be effective, the results for key aspects of case supervision (assessment, planning, delivery, reviewing) were much better, compared to those cases where management oversight was absent, ineffective, or insufficient.

In probation, only 28 per cent of the inspected probation cases received sufficient management oversight in the judgement of inspectors. The 2022/2023 annual report on probation describes this situation as 'alarming' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023c, p. 9), notwithstanding the significant changes to the delivery model in recent times and the evidence from other sectors that restructurings can impact on frontline leadership and management practices (Cascio, 2002; Newell and Dopson, 1996). Typical failings in oversight included:

- SPOs signing off OASys[4] assessments without reading them in depth
- SPOs not being available for consultation about important casework issues
- oversight focusing more on processes than quality.

Figure 1 illustrates the improvements in implementation and delivery (across the three key areas of engagement, supporting desistance, and supporting the safety of others) when management oversight was judged to be effective. More detailed results are produced in Annex B; large improvements were observed in all aspects of supervision (assessment, planning, implementation, and reviewing) when the management oversight was judged to be effective. Importantly, regression analysis confirmed that effective management oversight was significantly associated with improved performance when controlling for a range of individual/case information variables.

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[4] The main probation assessment tool currently in use in England and Wales is the Offender Assessment System (OASys), which was initially developed in 2001, building upon the existing 'What Works' evidence base.

Figure 1: The impact of effective management oversight on probation service implementation and delivery

% cases in which implementation and delivery was judged to be effective

Key question	Cases with effective management oversight	Cases with insufficient, ineffective or absent management oversight
Engagement	82%	43%
Desistance	72%	31%
Safety of others	68%	20%
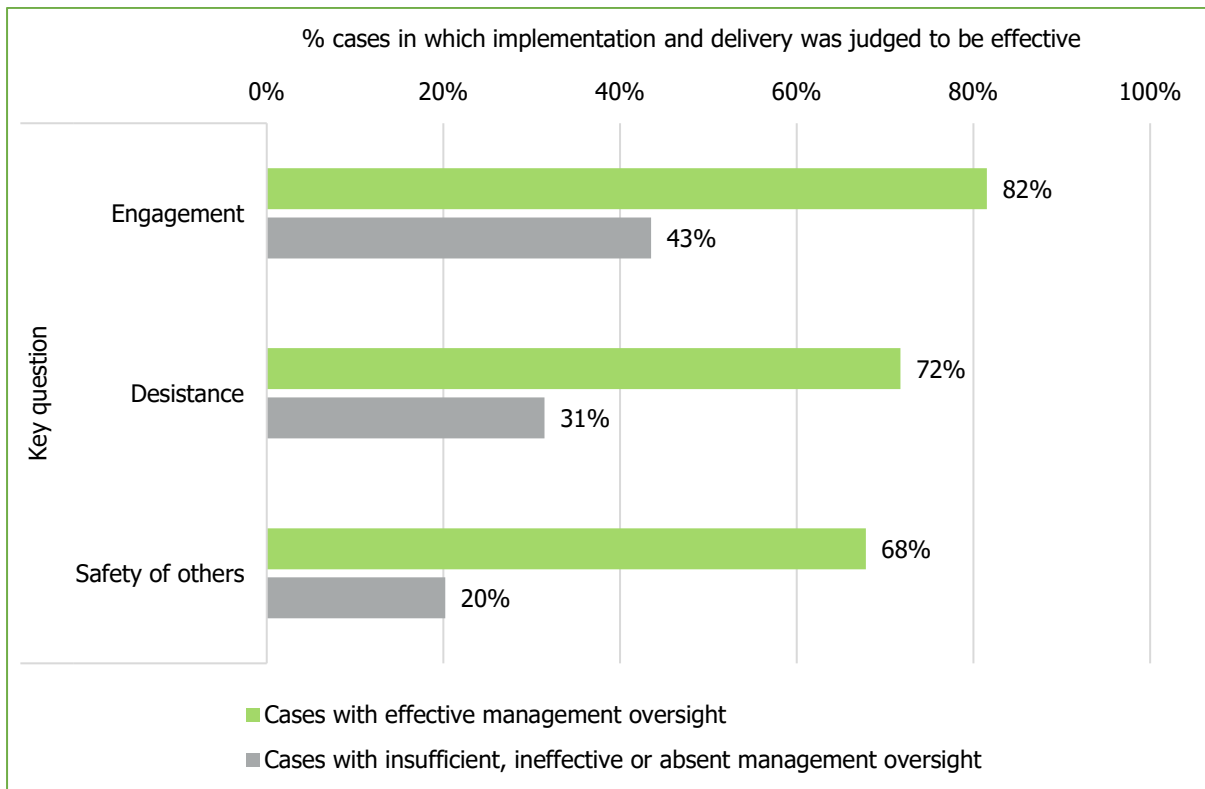
In our YJS inspections, we examined both court disposals (community sentences and post-custody cases) and out-of-court disposals (non-statutory community resolutions, youth cautions, and youth conditional cautions). In the court disposal cases, inspectors deemed that 59 per cent of the cases had received sufficient management oversight. Similarly, in the out-of-court disposal cases, inspectors deemed that 63 per cent of cases had received sufficient oversight.

As with the adult world, effective management oversight was significantly associated with all aspects of supervision for children in relation to both court disposals and out-of-court disposals. In Figures 2 and 3, we illustrate the results for implementation and delivery, and the three key questions – supporting desistance, supporting the safety of the child, and supporting the safety of others. Large improvements in implementation and delivery are evident when the management oversight was judged to be effective. Regression analysis again confirmed that effective management oversight was significantly associated with improved performance when controlling for a range of individual/case information variables; more detailed findings are reported in Annex B.

Figure 2: The impact of effective management oversight on YJS implementation and delivery – court disposals

% cases in which implementation and delivery was judged to be effective

Key question	Cases with sufficient management oversight	Cases with insufficient management oversight
Desistance	93%	63%
Safety of the child	94%	48%
Safety of others	88%	44%
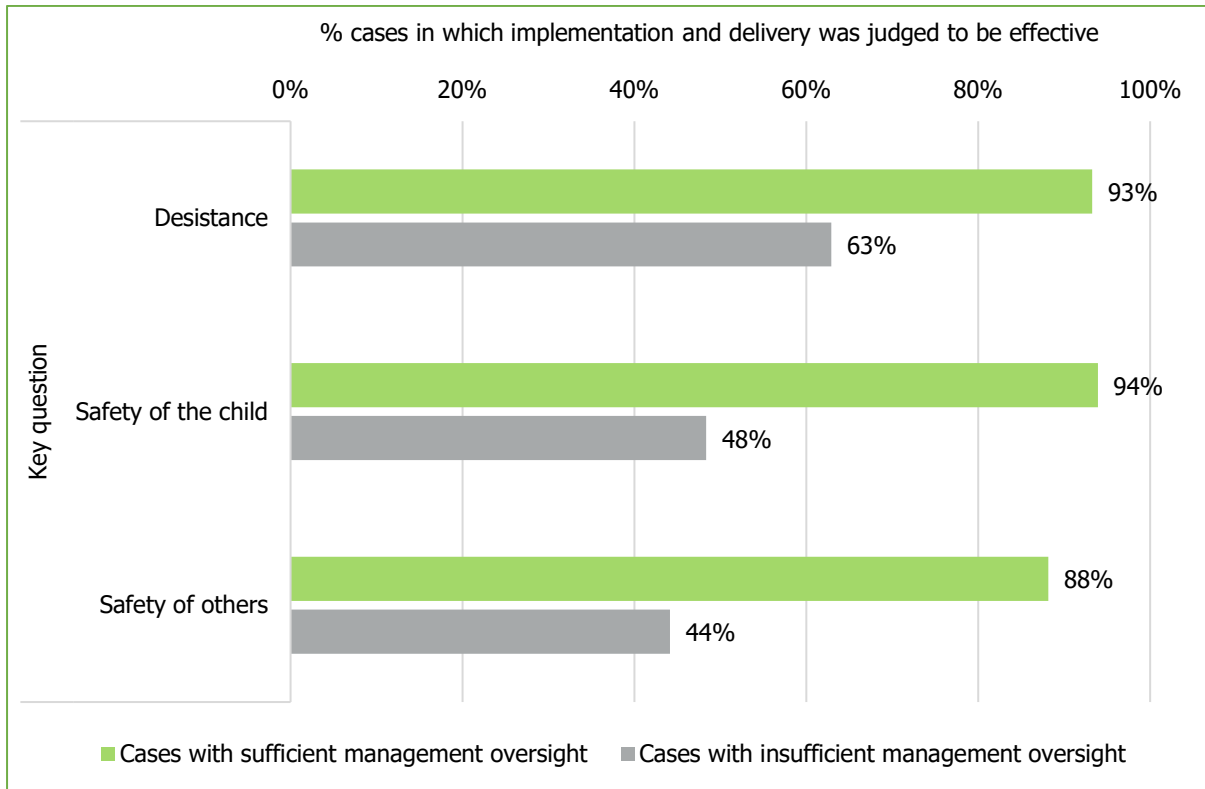
Figure 3: The impact of effective management oversight on YJS implementation and delivery – out-of-court disposals

% cases in which implementation and delivery was judged to be effective

Key question	Cases with sufficient management oversight	Cases with insufficient management oversight
Desistance	95%	58%
Safety of the child	90%	45%
Safety of others	91%	55%
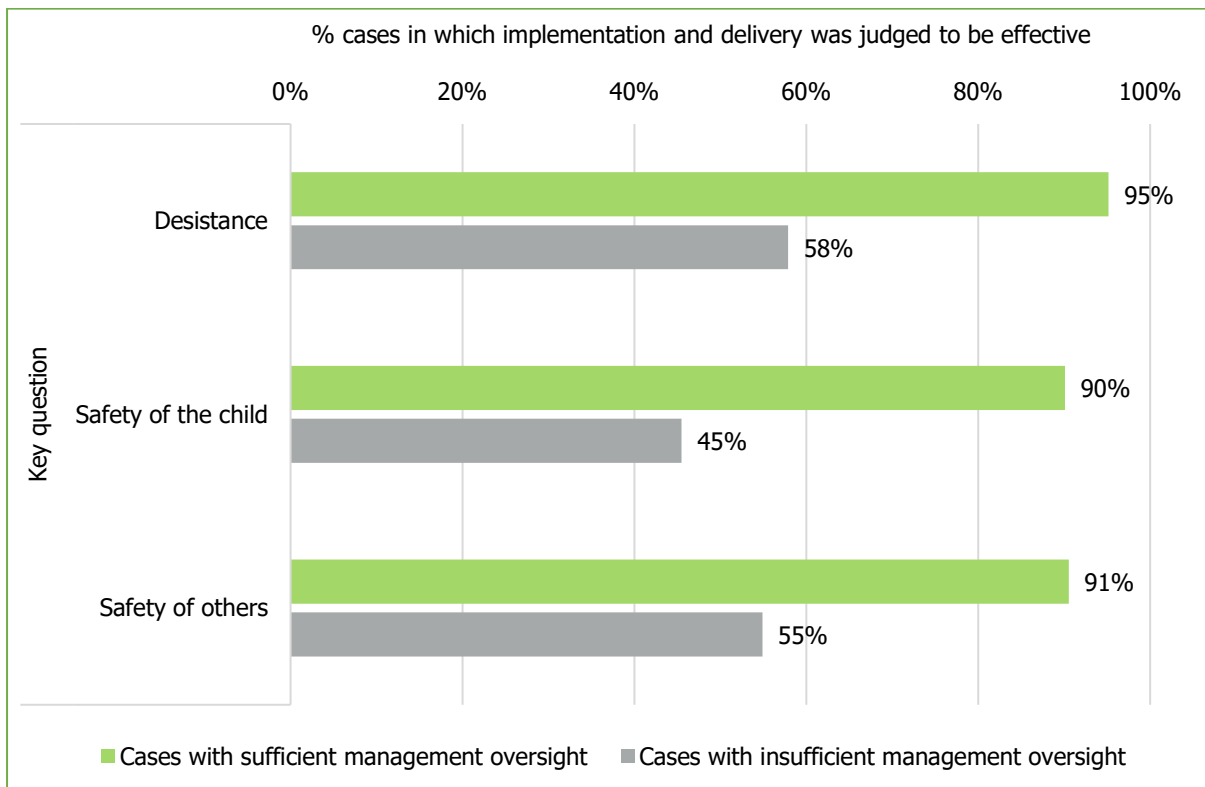
Providing advice and guidance is the core of management oversight. Inspection rules and guidance emphasise that 'effective management oversight is much more than countersigning and includes elements of quality assurance…dealing with developing areas of concern in individual cases and facilitating improvements in practice' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021b, p. 32). Where any deficits have been identified, management oversight is judged sufficient where case managers have received guidance to rectify this. The YJB also highlights that line managers are 'responsible for providing advice and agreeing actions which need to be carried out to ensure that children are effectively supported' (YJB 2022, p. 15).

Inspectors applauded those cases where managers were proactive, made themselves available to staff, and ensured agreed actions were undertaken:

> *"Oversight is frequent, with evidence of quality assurance of assessment work, identification of areas of improvement, and follow up." (Youth, management oversight rated sufficient)*

> *"Clear evidence of the practitioner approaching management for oversight and consideration of new information. Oversight is frequent, reflective and guides actions". (Probation, management oversight rated sufficient)*

Supervision sessions are an essential part of the line management role. One-to-one appointments need to be well planned, regularly scheduled, and given a high priority so that postponements are rare (Warwickshire Youth Justice Services, 2016). Both the manager and the practitioner should prepare for supervision sessions, which should take place in a quiet and private space, without interruptions. Supervision discussions should be clearly recorded, actions noted, and be available to both manager and practitioner (HMPPS, 2022; Warwickshire Youth Justice Services, 2016).

An inspector noted such regular and supportive supervision by a SPO in a case assessment:

> *"Practitioner spoke of six-weekly supervision, being well supported by their SPO and in supervision being able to speak about cases of concern and being presented with challenge and support in determining what comes next". (Probation, management oversight rated sufficient)*

While regular supervision in an essential element of management oversight, effective management is not something which can be achieved solely during scheduled sessions. For management oversight to be sufficient, managers need to be available to address any concerns or questions when they arise in an individual case – particularly important when one recognises the dynamic nature of many cases and how desistance from offending can be a difficult and complex process, involving lapses and relapses. Inspectors noted how responsive and accessible managers had improved practice and supported staff in these cases:

> *"There is evidence of regular management oversight taking place on a monthly basis and this was verified by the case manager. In addition, the case manager comments that there is an open-door policy with regards to supporting staff with queries and questions." (Youth, management oversight rated sufficient)*

> *"Case manager has reported that in addition to management oversight at multi-agency meetings, she has received monthly supervision. This case has also been discussed weekly and she has received support as and when needed given the circumstances of the case." (Youth, management oversight rated sufficient)*

Although the importance of management oversight to achieving positive and safe case supervision in probation and youth justice seems is well recognised, we have found in recent inspections that many cases lacked effective management oversight. Inspector case commentary (probation and youth) and SPO survey responses (probation) throw light on the

current deficiencies and the barriers to effective management oversight. Several areas for improvement in management oversight emerge.

2.1.1 Providing and evidencing clear guidance

For inspectors, it was important that managers left a 'clear footprint' of management oversight, with a written record in the case notes of what had been discussed and what actions were agreed. Good record-keeping supports clarity of analysis and purpose. Analysis of inspector commentary alongside negative judgements on management oversight often emphasise this point. As one inspector remarked upon a case assessment:

> "While the practitioner believed that she receives sufficient management support, there does not appear to be any footprint of management oversight across the file". (Probation, management oversight rated insufficient)

Inspectors wanted to see how much impact management oversight was having upon the person being supervised, as observed in this case commentary:

> "Whilst there was a footprint across the electronic record, I am not sure how much 'teeth' the manager had in trying to access the right support for this child". (Youth, management oversight rated insufficient)

Where the manager adopts a minimal approach, the work undertaken is unlikely to meet inspection standards:

> "There is no management oversight in this case other than countersigning the OASys, which has deficits. The manager noted actions in respect of the local drug agency, which were not monitored to see if they were followed through". (Probation, management oversight rated insufficient)

> "There was a note following countersigning of the AssetPlus which detailed lots of amendments, including more detail required on the risk management plan. This was not actioned and so I recommend the need for better mechanisms to ensure line management follow up on actions set". (Youth, management oversight rated insufficient)

2.1.2 Providing regular and meaningful supervision

We have previously stated as follows: 'management oversight through supervision should enable both supervisor and supervisee to reflect on, scrutinise and evaluate the work being undertaken and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the practice and interventions being carried out on the child or person on probation' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022a, p. 3). Furthermore, we have made it clear that 'in all cases, but especially those of raised risk of harm and safety and wellbeing, supervision should be regular, purposeful, clearly recorded and contribute to the management of the case' (p. 2). The Council of Europe Probation Rules Commentary (2010b) also highlight that regular meetings should take place between practitioners and their line managers for general supervision and detailed case discussion.

Managers should be approachable and available when needed, and meet regularly with their staff. They should provide sound professional guidance, challenge, encouragement and motivation, with thoughtful, honest and constructive feedback on performance. However, in the following case, inspectors noted how a lack of meaningful manager involvement undermined practice:

> "Manager's oversight is detailed in the contact record via regular, monthly supervision. However, in my judgement, it is not having an impact on the on-going supervision of the child. There is an apparent lack of challenge around

gaps in assessment and triangulation of information as well as deficits in planning and responding to safeguarding and risk management practice".
(Youth, management oversight rated insufficient)

2.1.3 Training and support in management oversight for frontline leaders

The inspectorate's 2022 annual report on YJS inspections argued that management oversight was an area where more training and support was required for YJS managers. Where management oversight was deficient, it was more likely that YJS managers had a very broad portfolio of duties, and/or were managing larger numbers of staff. Consequently, these managers lacked the time to devote to sufficient discussion of individual cases and supporting improvement in professional practice.

Our survey of SPOs found that just one in four (24 per cent) believed that they had received sufficient training for the role (see Figure 4), and only 12 per cent reported that they had received an induction when promoted. Echoing the YJS findings, only 13 per cent of SPOs reported receiving sufficient HR support, and less than half (43 per cent) felt that they had sufficient administrative support to deliver management oversight.

Figure 4: SPO survey findings on training and support
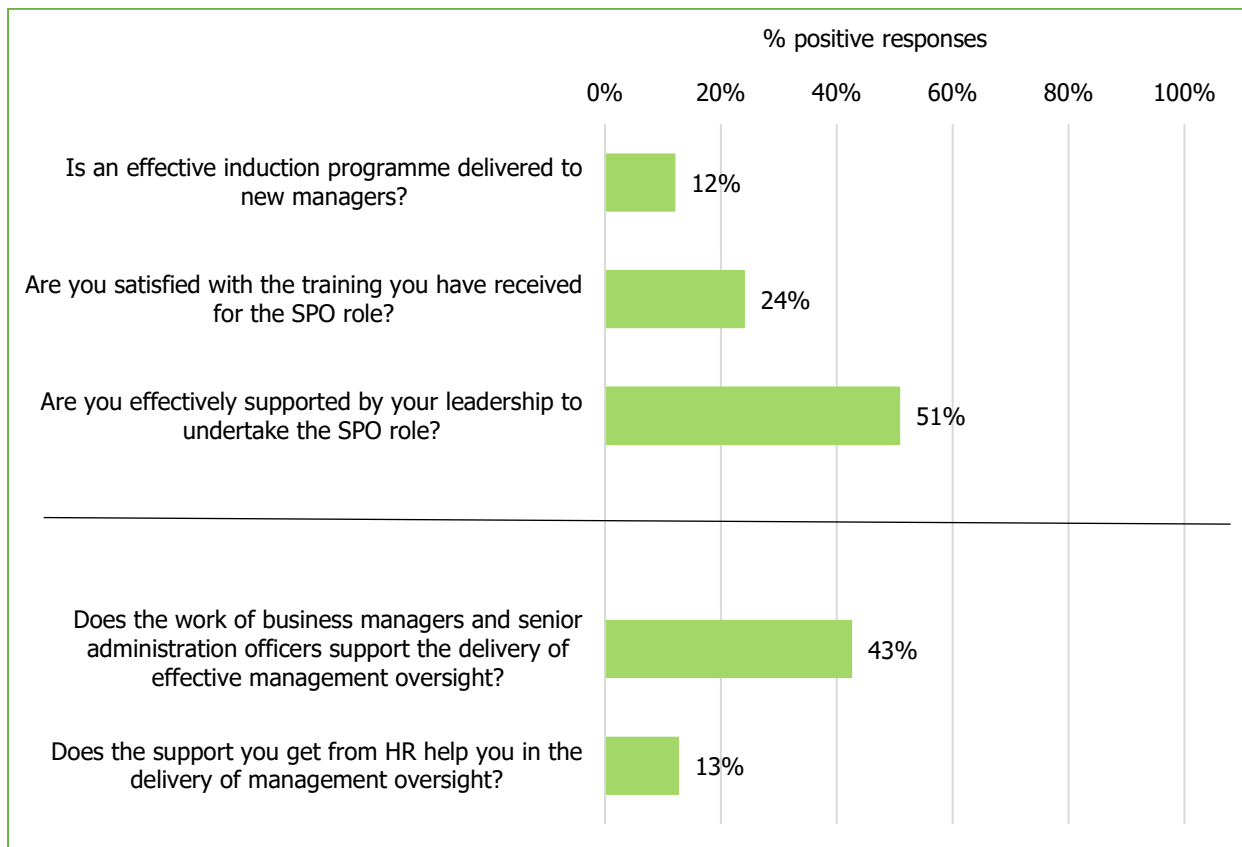
An SPO explained the lack of job-specific training and business support in a survey response:

"Admin support - arranging meetings, entering data on SOP [the Single Operating Platform], and HR Support - HR policies (attendance management, performance etc.) are the biggest impact on time currently, with little in-person local support or training." (Community Sentence Management SPO).

In a similar vein, another SPO found that the training offered did not address practical matters or keep frontline leaders up to date on policy and good practice:

> "Specific SPO training (which I feel should be offered prior to anyone becoming an SPO - sadly some practitioners think the SPO workload is less than a probation professional!) - Introductory SPO training, not civil service dribble about policies. I want to see how to lead, how to manage, how to empower, how to hold meaningful discussions, how to become a good leader and best support staff - Risk and practice training for us as SPOs! Keep us up to date too - don't assume we'll just pick it up. Keep us up to date so we can do the best by our staff. - Less decisions about staffing from workforce planning and more listening to SPOs/PDUs about the actual resource issues - Resource our teams / resource us - Take away HR / Admin / Building / Facilities - refocus the role purely on leadership and managing / supporting a team of sentence management PPs." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

Another typical comment about insufficient training and ongoing support describes the feeling of being abandoned once appointed:

> "I have not long been in post and have essentially had to sink or swim! I have not received any formal training and received very little feedback; whether that is positive or negative. I am learning as I go and this concerns me when I am then entrusted to deal with serious matters; such as staff sickness (which could lead to all sorts of HR issues if not done correctly) and also making important directive decisions to frontline staff at the drop of a hat. Formal SPO training/ courses should be mandatory on appointment; whether that is into a permanent or act up/temporary role." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

2.2   Making time for reflective practice supervision

> "We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience."
> John Dewey (American philosopher/psychologist)

The most effective organisations provide learning environments with a culture of support and critical reflection, and staff continually looking for ways to develop and improve – there are clear links here to the concepts of a growth mindset and professional curiosity (Phillips et al., 2022). Reflective practice supervision should thus be protected time for a practitioner to discuss challenging and complex cases with their manager, another senior practitioner, or with a professional trainer. The aim of reflection is to offer practitioners an opportunity to pause and critically evaluate their practice, including their feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about their work, and challenge any assumptions and biases which they may hold knowingly or unknowingly. Options for improvement can be discussed and plans for the future can be made or reviewed within the session (SCIE, 2017).

In their reflective practice supervision standards (RPSS) for probation managers, HMPPS (2023) highlight that practitioners should feel that a case discussion 'belongs' to them as much as it 'belongs' to their line manager. As such, agenda setting should be a two-way process. Practitioners should come to the session prepared and knowing which cases they would like to reflect on in depth and why. Within youth justice, the IDEAS model sets out the interconnected knowledge, skills, attitudes and personal qualities which the research evidence suggests are all part of what it takes to be an effective practitioner. Dix and Meade (2023) highlight how practitioners can use the model as part of individual reflection or through more formal supervision, with each aspect of the model mapped out to help them

identify where their strengths are and where they are most confident, and also to identify any training or development needs they have.

Influence	• The ability to have and to use influence
Delivery	• The ability to skilfully use the tools and systems which support practice
Expertise	• A focus on continually building one's knowledge and translating it into practice
Alliance	• The ability to develop positive relationships
Support	• A focus on encouraging and supporting resilience in practitioners

As part of the guidance on RPSS, HMPPS (2023) have indicated the minimum frequency of meetings for this purpose, requiring four structured in-depth case discussions with two practice observations, and the use of managerial judgement to decide whether more frequent sessions may be required for less experienced staff, or for staff dealing with particularly challenging or distressing cases. The reflective practice sessions should last between 60 and 90 minutes, thus allowing time for quality conversations to take place. While regularity is an essential ingredient, it is recognised that SPOs should avoid giving 'quick fix' solutions. Similarly, inspector commentary illustrates that management oversight in supervision will be viewed positively when this makes a meaningful contribution towards the quality of the work undertaken.

Three in four (76 per cent) of the SPOs who responded to our survey reported that they were confident that they understood their responsibilities in relation to reflective supervision. In their comments, however, many SPOs were concerned that the bureaucratic demands of line management and management oversight policies undermined their ability to find enough time for reflection and meaningful case discussion with team members. In addition, there can be a tendency for overworked probation professionals to simply comply with the required processes and seek directive leadership, rather than reflect on their practice and grow as practitioners, as the following quotes illustrate:

> "Management oversight has become a box ticking process. The best way to remove autonomy, self-efficacy and professionalism from probation staff is to continue the current approach where everything requires a management oversight contact log. Management oversight should be fluid, and when necessary, with six-weekly supervision too." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

> "Managers oversight seems to take away professional opinions. Staff seem to see management oversight as a covering exercise – they are too high on WMT (Workload Measurement Tool) and therefore do not have space for reflection or conversations and therefore seek direction from management." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

Inspection rules and guidance (Probation: 2023b, p. 11; Youth: 2021, p. 116) specify that 'no evidence of reflective practice' is one of the problems which can lead inspectors to rate the staffing standard as inadequate. This insufficiency emerges strongly in inspector commentary on negative judgements:

> "Management oversight of case is frequent in record but is process-led as opposed to providing an opportunity for reflection on the case and supervision of the case manager". (Youth, management oversight rated insufficient)

> "Following the feedback in the inspection interview, the case manager identified that when he discussed gaps or concerns, the level of oversight was limited. The case manager identified that he would have benefited from critically reflective supervision and I would echo these observations". (Youth, management oversight rated insufficient)

> "Management oversight is ineffective. The practitioner told me that there had been lots of changes of manager over a short period of time and there was a general lack of reflective supervision". (Probation, management oversight rated insufficient)

> "Management oversight has not assisted in this case. It is very lacklustre and where oversight has been recorded, it adds nothing to management of the case. It needs to be more reflective and challenging". (Probation, management oversight rated insufficient)

2.3 Role drift, role conflict and role ambiguity

The evidence is strong for both the importance of management oversight in securing the objectives of probation and youth justice work, and for how reflective practice supervision can underpin management oversight through facilitating the development of effective supervision skills for members of staff.

In this section, we turn to the barriers and difficulties that frontline managers face in focusing upon these essential activities for their teams. Several themes emerge from the SPO survey including excessive workloads, anxieties about risk escalation being 'missed' and subsequent serious further offending, inexperienced staff, and unnecessary bureaucracy.

These themes emerge less frequently from recent YJS inspections where we report that most YJSs are good or outstanding on the staffing standard (25 of 33 inspections, HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023a). Those YJSs deemed to be performing well on staffing are characterised by stable and well-motivated workforces with reasonable caseloads, good training opportunities, and active managers. These results are reflected in the very high levels of YJS staff satisfaction with their managers (96 per cent very good or quite good) and management oversight (94 per cent very good or quite good). As such, we will focus upon the probation issues identified by SPOs.

2.3.1 Role drift – the 'junk drawer'

The *Managerial Role Review* by HMPPS (2022) was a major research project into the SPO role collating both quantitative and qualitative data. SPOs provided detailed estimates of their work activities which revealed that considerable amounts of work time were spent on non-operational activities, such as dealing with emails unrelated to probation work, HR activities, office and building management, and other peripheral tasks. Focus groups with SPOs found that that scope creep, role ambiguity, and unmanageable spans of control left SPOs feeling they were the "junk drawer" of the service: they were being overloaded with tasks and responsibilities beyond the core role (HMPPS, 2022, p.11).

Staff shortages and the resultant high caseloads led SPOs (and their teams) to feel anxious about their ability to manage risk and protect the public. SPOs reported feeling exposed and unsupported by probation leaders. The Review's recommendations included clarifying the SPO role with a core job description to refocus it upon operational and team leadership tasks, and to clarify the tasks and activities from supporting administrative roles. The Review noted that the priority for SPOs in the focus groups was for the Probation Service to provide more and better business support for HR and general office tasks. The authors also highlighted that reducing the workload and span of control of SPOs to an acceptable level would ultimately require the recruitment of more SPOs and more support staff.

Our survey of SPOs found similar sentiments of resentment at having too broad a range of tasks, including those not directly related to helping their teams manage their caseloads safely and effectively. This frustration with role drift is reflected in these, typical, statements from SPOs:

> "We are treated like a 'catch all', 'when in doubt contact a SPO'... we pick up everything. I spend my working day answering immediate queries from staff, keeping on top of emails and attending meetings, I am constantly interrupted. I am never able to get on with actual work, which means that my own time in evenings and weekends are often taken up by work." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

> "The span of control for SPO's is absolutely not sustainable in the long term. Stress and burnout are an issue. We are asked to do many managerial roles in one and we are missing the whole point of a senior probation officer – in that we are there to guide and support staff to be the best they can be while managing risk. HR takes over most of the time. Workload is way above what hours we can manage in a day." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

The following accounts from frontline SPOs show the types of non-operational tasks which take away time and energy from core probation work. Such peripheral tasks are often associated with general office management, HR activities, IT issues, and bureaucratic exercises for HMPPS central units.

> "I am snowed under all of the time. I do not have the time to dedicate to tasks properly. I could do 60 hours a week and never finish. I am completely bogged down with performance, repetition of tasks, HR, building issues, staff stress and burnout and seeing angry PoPs [people on probation] it is almost impossible if you are a frontline SPO why we are doing RCAT [5] and SEEDS when we are under so much pressure is beyond me." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

> "I am ordering IT, dealing with building issues, health and safety investigations, staff investigations, planning defendants. It is endless. There is no time to carry out my main functions and there is a new portal or IT page being rolled out regularly which I am also expected to learn and use. There is no admin support with anything, so I am also completing a lot of what used to be admin tasks. It's extremely difficult at the moment and not getting any better." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

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[5] Regional Case Assessment Tool: an audit tool to examine the last three months of casework and assessment in selected regions.

2.3.2 Role conflict and ambiguity – managerialism versus professionalism

"Almost everything in leadership comes back to relationships."

Mike Krzyzewski (American coach)

Staff supervision is a contestable arena in other helping professions, such as nursing or social work, as well as in probation and youth justice (Ainslie et al., 2022). Senior organisational leaders may want supervision to have a surveillance and control focus, while helping professionals want supervision to be a reflective space where team leaders assist with professional development, psychological safety, and wellbeing (recognising the high levels of emotional labour involved in the work (Phillips, Westaby and Fowler, 2020)), while also providing guidance and support in managing more complex cases. This tension creates role conflict and role ambiguity for middle managers who may be forced to choose whether staff supervision is 'a forum for critical reflection and learning, or a surveillance tool' (Pereira and Trotter, 2019, p. 263).

Research (Pereira and Trotter, ibid) indicates that a dominant focus on performance management is counterproductive in helping professions as it leads to reactive and mechanistic practice. The relationship-building skills that are associated with the better supervision of people in conflict with the law – establishing positive relationships which are supportive, respectful and trusting (Raynor, 2019) – are also important in the manager-practitioner relationship. There needs to be a focus on developing relationships throughout the staffing team, supporting the building of trust and promoting a safer environment for staff to address any challenges (Hands and Lewis, 2023).

In our SPO survey, role conflict emerged as a strong theme, with frontline leaders explaining the difficulty of being both an enforcer of rules and a practice coach. This tension becomes very challenging as the too broad range of responsibilities curtails the mentoring and guiding role of SPOs. The role conflict is further heightened in the current period as SPOs are managing many more newly appointed probation professionals; this less experienced cohort need much more SPO time for advice, coaching and wellbeing support. As these SPOs explain in their own words:

> *"The lack of [staff] experience means that I am constantly in demand which is great because that senior practitioner role is what I signed up for and I love sharing my knowledge and understanding of quality practice. Sadly, there is just not enough hours in the week to deal with the volume of emails, questions, phone calls, teams, meetings, countersigning, emotional/stress management of the team, etc. I regularly work 45-50 hours a week but could do more if I allowed myself."* (Community Sentence Management SPO)

> *"I feel like sometimes I am worrying too much about hitting management oversight responsibilities as a process rather than responding to risk as it arises. I also feel concerned sometimes that we have to rely on PPs [probation professionals] to bring issues to us for discussion and that isn't reflected in the TP [Touch Point] model. It should be a joint effort to achieve management oversight."* (Community Sentence Management SPO)

2.4 Potential solutions

The evidence from the sources used in this study indicates that there are potential solutions to the barriers to effective frontline leadership in the worlds of probation and youth justice. The following solutions are considered in the sub-sections below.

2.4.1 Improving induction and training

Respondents to the SPO survey told us their ideas to improve the experience of frontline probation leadership. One of the more common themes was a call for better SPO induction training and more ongoing training; these are typical statements from SPOs.

> "Training for new staff needs to improve as this would have a massive impact on SPO's who then are picking up the pieces afterwards. Stop PQiP[6] as it is now, employ only PSO's and when they are competent allow them to apply for PQiP." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

> "The job came with no training package at all and my first manager was often absent through sickness so I felt like I had to learn on my own. Within months of being in the role a fellow SPO went off sick for six weeks and I had to manage their team as well as my own – approximately 16 Probation officers/PSOs. I had no training in HR process; no training in SOP; no training in performance management." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

> "I had absolutely no training as an SPO who started my role in the prison. I have just learnt as I went along. There should be a formal one- to four-week training programme for new SPOs." (OMiC SPO)

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[6] PQiP is the Professional Qualification in Probation.

The need for more specialist training for staff with managerial and leadership responsibilities is recognised within the Council of Europe guidelines covering the recruitment, training and professional development of probation staff (Council of Europe, 2019; Carr, 2020). In order for supervision to be effective, managers need to build relationships with individual practitioners. The following two key skillsets are required:

- the process-oriented skills of role clarification and 'contracting' a working alliance with staff

- the interpersonal skills of conveying positive regard, active listening and generating a feeling of warmth, trust and safety. The attributes of openness, honesty, being fully present and using humour are vital to creating an environment to share practice experiences and receive feedback.

It has been found that managers using a mix of these skills promote creativity, feelings of safety and belonging, and increase staff retention. Managers should thus be supported in developing these skills through induction and ongoing training, including a focus on how best to implement reflective practice sessions.

2.4.2 Improving administrative support and staff deployment

Another popular proposal from SPOs was for more administrative and business management support to enable them to focus upon working with practitioners to secure the primary goals of probation.

> "Take the HR/Sickness away from managers. This takes up so much time and we should just have a dedicated HR that we email with name, date, first day of sickness etc and they do the rest. Also dedicated admin support, someone to type up supervision notes etc. You also need a good admin support for the teams – unhelpful admin SAO [Senior Administrative Officers] that always say that they can't help or support – is draining and damaging to the general morale of the office." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

> "Having an SPO admin would be beneficial in ensuring we keep up with touch point oversights." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

More flexible cover arrangements, staff deployments and rotations were also suggested by several SPOs.

> "Staff to be redeployed from PDUs way under 100% on WMT - it is totally unacceptable to have staff in the same region working with such different workloads yet earning the same money." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

> "All non-sentence management PP roles should be fixed term, so staff come back and there is more movement, more opportunity for staff to get a break from sentence management and not burn out." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

> "I feel that a protected day each month to catch up on operational work would be useful as well as the opportunity to attend more training events." (Community Sentence Management SPO)

2.4.3 Committing to reflective practice as part of a wider learning culture

Within probation, RPSS is underpinned by evidence-informed guidance from the SEEDS and SEEDS2 action research projects (Rex and Hosking, 2013). One of the principles of the SEEDS approach is that practitioners regularly reflect on their practice, 'not as an optional

extra but as a fundamental part of their ongoing professional development and in order to inform the judgements they make every day' (HMPPS, 2022, p. 5). The importance of reflective practice is further highlighted through the new Probation Professional Standards (HMPPS, 2023); one of the seven standards states as follows: 'I am committed to maintaining and developing high standards of professional expertise, practice and service delivery through continuous professional development'. The underpinning behaviours encompass both supervision sessions and reflective practice supervision.

Similarly, the YJB (2022) advise caseworkers that 'it is important that you take time to consider your work and ways in which your practice or outcomes arising from your involvement have been effective or could have been different or improved. For this to be effective you should have sufficient time and focus to enable you to critically assess what you have done.' Furthermore, youth justice professionals are encouraged to 'share what you learn from reflective practice with colleagues and provide observations from your experience to inform your personal development and that of the service. The aim is for you to develop an 'internal supervisor', so that you can: (i) give your work a critical appraisal; (ii) develop confidence in your skills, and (iii) make your practice more effective'.

Inspector commentary illustrates that allowing time for reflective practice supervision is a feature of cases where management oversight is deemed to be effective:

> "The case manager recalled her positive experience of oversight in this case. There is evidence of significant management oversight which is reflective of the child's risks. The contact logs evidence detailed case discussions and reflective case supervision in addition to the formal risk management meetings. Appropriate actions were set and subsequently followed up". (Youth, management oversight rated sufficient)

> "Oversight is evident at various stages, with the case manager providing confidence that a reflective approach is supportive to examining the child's case. This includes considering any barriers and setting out actions. This is seen through a review being undertaken and revisions taking place in management of the case." (Youth, management oversight rated sufficient)

> "Regular management oversight on file and demonstrated reflective discussions around the case as well as appropriate guidance". (Probation, management oversight rated sufficient)

> "Oversight is apparent within the casefile, and the practitioner describes a supportive, reflective and approachable mechanism for support. This reflection has enabled the practitioner to outline approaches and move forward in supporting the person on probation in this case". (Probation, management oversight rated sufficient)

It is notable that in Wales, probation senior leaders have implemented a 'learning organisation' model in a bid to transform the operational culture and to improve service delivery. The design of the model involved extensive engagement with staff, and led to a number of key strands, one of them being leadership and team development. Practitioners are now supported through: (i) early morning check-in meetings for all team members, which allow potential concerns to be raised and for them to be resolved at an early stage; and (ii) daily protected time when SPOs are available for consultation.

Consideration should also be given to who else could provide valuable input and support practitioners in reflecting upon their practice. Reflective practice supervision can involve other senior practitioners, professional trainers or mentors, and there can also be considerable benefits from peer consultation (Canton and Dominey, 2018), including the

wider sharing of knowledge through team/group discussions and exercises, recognising the role of teams as fundamental learning units in modern organisations (Senge, 2006.)

A key feature of Enhanced Case Management (ECM) – a relational psychosocial approach to working with children supervised by YJSs (also initiated in Wales) – is the role of the clinical psychologist who does not work directly with any children but supports YJS practitioners to develop trauma-informed responses and also offers clinical supervision to practitioners to provide the opportunity for reflection and discussion. The ECM findings to date (Glendinning et al., 2021; Opinion Research Services, 2023; Evans et al., 2023) have highlighted how the integrity of the psychologist's support can add validation to the YJS practitioner's decision-making, although care needs to be taken to explain the distinct supportive role of the clinical psychologist so that practitioners and managers do not feel that their own credibility and professional abilities are being questioned.

2.4.4 Adopting the role of 'connecting leaders'

The business studies literature is also helpful for identifying potential solutions as many of the problems for frontline leaders in probation and youth justice are familiar in other sectors. For example, a McKinsey (2023) survey of middle managers across many types of business echoed the problems identified in this bulletin. Middle managers were 'stuck in the menial' of administrative tasks and servicing bureaucratic imperatives at the expense of purposeful operational and leadership activity.

Jaser (2021) offers a potential way out of the quandary by conceptualising middle managers as 'connecting leaders'. Connecting leaders bridge the gap between senior leadership decisions and operational staff realities. Thus, middle managers are the 'engine of the business, the cogs that make things work, the glue that keeps companies together'. Jaser then provides a typology of roles that middle managers can play to manage the role conflict and ambiguity which is, to some extent, inevitable in their connecting role. Within all these modes, there are risks and there are accompanying strategies to mitigate those risks. Clear understanding of these modes and the risk mitigators by senior leaders, middle managers, and staff members can improve organisational relationships and functioning.

Connecting Leader Mode	Practice	Main Risk	Mitigator
Janus	Empathising with both sides	Burnout and emotional labour	Coaching and psychological support
Broker	Negotiating with both sides to bring them together	Senior colleagues' lack of availability	Embracing a culture of transparency and humility
Conduit	Speaking up for others	Exposing oneself personally to the top	Fostering a culture of psychological safety
Tightrope walker	Critical thinking and appraising both sides of dilemmas	Cognitive overload, confusion, and being slow to action	Encouraging safe critical-thinking spaces for peer discussions

Source: Jaser (2021)

Another key message from the business literature is that middle managers need a climate of 'psychological safety' to function effectively (Edmondson and Lei, 2014; McKinsey, 2021). Psychological safety is characterised by honest discussion and a problem-solving approach in organisations, and allows managers to feel comfortable to speak openly about their own and staff concerns to senior leaders. Reamer (2023) further highlights the importance of ethical humility, with high levels of humility increasing the likelihood of leaders fostering a culture that values honesty, respect, trustworthiness and integrity, with employees benefitting from greater psychological safety. All of this fits well with the stated HMPPS commitment to building an 'open, learning culture' (HMPPS, 2023).

2.4.5   Reintroducing the senior practitioner role

Many SPOs called for a return of the senior practitioner role that was common in the Probation Trusts era (2001 to 2014) and is prevalent across YJSs.

> *"Set up Band 5 senior practitioners so that quality experienced staff can progress without having to go into management." (Community Sentence Management SPO)*

> *"Have a balance of mixed grades within the team, senior practitioner role to support SPOs with OASys, clear guidance on what is required to manage PQiPs and new PSO's, and time to support their training and development."*

The realist review of effective management by Manchester Metropolitan University (Fox et al., 2024) highlights the senior practitioner role as a potential solution not only to reducing the burden on frontline leaders, but also to possibly stemming the 'exodus' of experienced staff leaving the Probation Service. We have recently reported that two thirds of the 359 probation officers who left the service in 2022/2023 had five years or more experience in the job (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023c). Their knowledge and experience cannot be replaced easily, and these professionals are likely to have been instrumental in informal coaching and training of new entrants. The introduction of a senior practitioner role in probation, a role that is common in youth justice and child protection services, may entice some experienced professionals to remain in or return to the service.[7] Some of these experienced staff may wish to continue in practice, remaining free of wider management responsibilities but having their experience and knowledge recognised through a dedicated role with appropriate status and pay. It is notable that coaching is a key component of the Full Range Leadership Model of transformational leadership (Avolio, Bass and Jung, 1999), positively evaluated by Wang et al. (2011) and DeRue et al. (2011).

Fox et al. (2024) note the sparsity of research on the senior practitioner role in criminal justice – including youth justice – and in other sectors. However, the realist review highlights the experience of 'legacy nurses' in the NHS, an initiative designed to retain and spread the expertise of experienced nurses. A study of a legacy nurses project in Norfolk (Hardy, 2023) outlined how this newly created senior practitioner role improved learning for new recruits through hands-on support with difficult cases and reflective supervision sessions. The benefits realised included a reduced intention to leave amongst experienced and new staff, spreading practice wisdom across the service and its partners, and enabling a holistic focus upon the patient journey rather than individual tasks.

Legacy nurses thus appears to be an important exemplar for probation and youth justice services to consider when designing staff structures and roles in a time of staff shortages and high staff turnover.

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[7] The Probation Service are launching an alumni programme which will include an option for SPOs who left the service within the last five years to fast-track their way back.

2.4.6 Considering self-managing teams

The realist review (Fox et al., 2024) considers whether self-managing teams, first evolved in the 1970s, might offer relief for frontline leaders overburdened with performance management and quality assurance duties. A self-managing team is a team that has been empowered by the wider organisation to take responsibility for delivering a specific service. The team is non-hierarchical and works as a group to achieve objectives within set guidelines and agreed targets, delegating individuals to tasks, and developing and refining processes to meet customer needs (Sigma Connected, 2023).

The most promising deployment of the self-managing team model identified by Fox et al. (ibid) is the Buurtzorg community nursing initiative. Several studies indicate that Buurtzorg-style self-managing teams increased both client and professional satisfaction, reduced staff absenteeism, and reduced organisational overheads. To achieve these results, managers must become coaches who empower staff members to become self-sufficient. Other key success mechanisms include high-quality ICT systems[8] and clear guidelines from organisational senior management.

Self-managed teams have a good track record in improving staff and patient results in healthcare settings through increasing staff flexibility and motivation. Nevertheless, the concept has had some challenges in implementation in the UK because of the NHS's cultural and regulatory context which reduced the professional autonomy of nurses. Similar issues may undermine a self-managed teams approach in the centralised civil service setting of the contemporary Probation Service.

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[8] We should note that outdated and clunky ICT has long been a problem in probation services in England and Wales. For example, the thematic inspection of Offender Management in Custody (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022) reported that poor connectivity between prison and probation systems impeded resettlement work with prison leavers.

3. Conclusion

The ability of frontline leaders to focus upon coaching, motivating, and delivering management oversight for their team members is critical to providing high-quality probation and youth justice services. The evidence from our recent inspections indicates that providing effective management oversight greatly improves the quality of supervision delivered by probation and youth justice professionals.

Management oversight was sufficient	Management oversight was insufficient
Implementation and delivery effectively supported desistance in: • 72 per cent of probation cases • 93 per of YJS court cases • 95 per cent of YJS out-of-court cases	Implementation and delivery effectively supported desistance in: • 31 per cent of probation cases • 63 per of YJS court cases • 58 per cent of YJS out-of-court cases

Youth justice services are generally performing better than probation services. The youth justice sector appears to benefit from more manageable caseloads and a stronger local focus with better integration and connections across helping services. In probation, there have been significant changes to the delivery model in recent years and the evidence indicates that SPOs currently have too broad a range of responsibilities and insufficient time and space (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 20223e). Consequently, SPOs lack the capacity to focus upon core probation work and team management. Too much SPO time is wasted in office management, HR issues, and other non-operational tasks that fall to SPOs because of insufficient administrative support. This situation appears to have occurred through drift rather than design.

The wider business literature notes that the problems of role ambiguity, role conflict and mission creep besetting middle management in probation is a widespread phenomenon across many sectors. However, some organisations have been able to rescue their frontline leaders from 'administrivia' through streamlining middle management into the roles of coach, innovator, problem-solver and connector (Randal, 2017).

The SPOs in our survey echoed this ambition to focus upon team leadership and improving professional practice. Respondents proposed a refocusing and upskilling of the SPO role to enable them to coach the new cohorts of professional professionals, who are being let down by the current mission drift. It is thus recommended that senior leaders in HMPPS should recast the SPO role and ensure frontline leaders in probation can focus upon professional guidance, development, and their connecting mission (facilitated through the necessary user-friendly tools, e.g. guided reflection templates). The protective and rehabilitative goals of the Probation Service will be more readily met if SPOs are permitted to do their job without a multitude of distractions and diversions. The evidence from the health sector indicates that there could be value in rediscovering the senior practitioner role to stem the exodus of experienced probation professionals and to encourage some to return, helping to

upskill the new cohorts being recruited. The positive experience of self-managing teams in some sectors should also be considered as a means of empowering and motivating local probation teams. Evaluations of both the senior practitioner role and self-managing teams would clearly help to strengthen the evidence base, and there is a wider need for the criminal justice sector to increase engagement with researchers working in public management and administration.

Attention should also be given to organisational culture and whether there is a clear focus on transparency, honesty, respect, integrity, involvement, empowerment, and psychological safety for staff. It has been found that the most effective organisations provide learning environments with a culture of support and critical reflection, with staff fully engaged and committed (Radcliffe, 2012), continually looking for ways to develop and improve. Notably, in Wales, probation senior leaders have implemented a 'learning organisation' approach in a bid to transform the operational culture and to improve service delivery. There are five strands to the approach: the development of a shared mental model; culture enquiry; cultural narrative; leadership and team development; and human factors tools/approaches. Crucially, the development of the approach has involved the investment of the whole management group and extensive engagement with staff. Moving forward, one of the challenges is sustaining the learning culture – this requires ongoing commitment and continuing investment at all levels and across all staff groups.

In recent years, greater attention has been given to transformational leadership principles, supported by evidence showing a positive relationship between such leadership and performance at the individual, team and organisational levels (Wang et al., 2011). Transformational leadership is an approach through which leaders encourage, inspire and motivate colleagues to create meaningful change. Ways of promoting and incentivising such transactional leadership behaviours should be considered, encouraging a focus upon people rather than tasks and the building of trust and strong two-way interpersonal relationships, facilitated through an open, supportive and safe environment.

Finally, as Burrell and Petrillo (2023, p. 185) highlight, close attention should be given to 'not what we want probation practitioners to do, but who we want probation practitioners to be'. If we want 'self-aware, reflexive, critical thinkers' then providing the time and space for reflective practice supervision as part of a wider learning culture is critical, helping all staff to continually develop and thrive.

> Learning organisations are those *"where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together."*
>
> Peter Senge (Founder of the Society for Organizational Learning)

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Annex A: Methodology

Inspection data

The inspection findings presented in this bulletin are based on data from:

- 48 inspections of YJSs completed between July 2021 and January 2023 (fieldwork weeks). The 48 YJSs are spread across all areas of England and Wales. Inspectors examined both court disposals (n=536) and out-of-court disposals (n=769).

- 32 inspections of probation services completed between October 2021 and May 2023 (fieldwork weeks). The 32 PDUs are spread across 11 of the 12 probation regions (England and Wales).

Table A1: Youth inspections, July 2021 to January 2023

Youth Justice Service	Month of report publication
Wirral	October 2021
Bedfordshire	December 2021
Harrow	December 2021
Leicestershire	December 2021
Tameside	December 2021
Wakefield	December 2021
Plymouth	February 2022
Swansea	February 2022
Wolverhampton	February 2022
Powys	March 2022
Surrey	March 2022
Barnet	May 2022
Calderdale	May 2022
Hillingdon	May 2022
Neath Port Talbot	May 2022
West Mercia	May 2022
Bridgend	June 2022
Portsmouth	June 2022
West Sussex	June 2022
Bolton	July 2022
Tower Hamlets	July 2022
Cardiff	August 2022
Thurrock	August 2022
Vale of Glamorgan	August 2022
Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly	September 2022
Derbyshire	September 2022
NE Lincolnshire	September 2022
Stoke-on-Trent	September 2022

Youth Justice Service	Month of report publication
Sutton	September 2022
Hammersmith and Fulham	October 2022
Monmouthshire and Torfaen	October 2022
Devon	November 2022
Durham	November 2022
Havering	November 2022
Stockport	November 2022
Sunderland	December 2022
York	December 2022
Blackburn with Darwen	January 2023
Buckinghamshire	January 2023
Dorset	January 2023
Suffolk	January 2023
Swindon	January 2023
Coventry	February 2023
St Helens	February 2023
Birmingham	March 2023
West Berkshire	March 2023
Lincolnshire	April 2023
Knowsley	May 2023

Table A2: Inspections of probation services, October 2021 – May 2023

Probation Delivery Unit	Month of report publication
Gwent	February 2022
Swansea and Neath Port Talbot	January 2022
West Kent	May 2022
West Sussex	May 2022
Essex North	May 2022
Northamptonshire	May 2022
Birmingham North, East and Solihull	August 2022
Staffordshire and Stoke	August 2022
Warwickshire	August 2022
Hammersmith, Fulham, Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	October 2022
Ealing and Hillingdon	October 2022
Lambeth	October 2022
Lewisham and Bromley	November 2022
Newham	November 2022
Barking, Dagenham and Havering	November 2022
Redcar, Cleveland and Middlesbrough	December 2022

Probation Delivery Unit	Month of report publication
South Tyneside and Gateshead	December 2022
Derby City	February 2023
Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland	February 2023
Kirklees	March 2023
Sheffield	March 2023
Hull and East Riding of Yorkshire	March 2023
North and North-East Lancashire	March 2023
Manchester North	May 2023
Tameside	May 2023
Wigan	May 2023
West Cheshire	June 2023
Blackburn and Darwen	June 2023
Knowsley and St Helens	June 2023
Liverpool North	June 2023
Cumbria	July 2023
Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight	July 2023

Case assessments

Probation

The cases inspected were those of people on probation who had started community sentences (community orders and suspended sentence orders) with an unpaid work, rehabilitation activity, and/or accredited programme requirement, and those cases starting post-release supervision, including licence and post-sentence supervision cases.

Rather than take a sample of cases, a cohort approach was used across the inspections, examining cases drawn from two separate weeks in the period between 27 and 32 weeks before the fieldwork, including all cases commenced (or released from custody) in each of those weeks. However, potential exclusions were as follows:

- cases where the same person had more than one sentence in the eligible period

- cases where the order or licence had terminated within seven days of commencement

- cases where there was a current serious further offence (SFO) investigation, serious case review, child practice review, or other similar investigation.

All cases in the cohort were allocated to individual inspectors. To support the reliability and validity of their judgements against our standards framework, all cases were examined using standard case assessment forms, underpinned by rules and guidance,[9] and further reinforced through training and quality assurance activities.

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[9] The rules and guidance can be accessed here: https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/about-hmi-probation/about-our-work/documentation-area/

YJS court disposals

The cases selected were those of children who had been given court disposals and had been under YJS supervision for approximately six to eight months. This enabled work to be examined in relation to assessing, planning, implementation and reviewing.

The overall sample size in each inspection was set out to achieve a confidence level of 80 per cent (with a margin of error of five percentage points), and we ensured that the ratios in relation to gender, type of disposal, and risk of serious harm level/safety and wellbeing classification matched those in the eligible population.

YJS out-of-court disposals

Similarly to court disposals, inspectors examined the assessment, planning and implementation stages of delivery. The cases selected were those of children who had commenced out-of-court disposals (community resolutions, cautions and conditional cautions) in the previous three to five months, with similar statistical and case-type considerations to domain two.

All sampled cases were allocated to individual inspectors. To support the reliability and validity of their judgements against our standards framework, all cases were examined using standard case assessment forms, underpinned by rules and guidance.

Analysis

Logistic regression has been used to analyse the case assessment data, examining which differences were significant when accounting for the relationships between variables. The independent variables were entered using a forward stepwise approach, incorporating the most significant variables in turn (statistical significance <.05) and then removing them at a later stage if necessary (significance >0.1). This approach was considered appropriate as the analysis was exploratory in nature and there was no clear evidence as to the relative importance of the various independent variables. All associations highlighted in the bulletin were found to be statistically significant, i.e. unlikely to have occurred randomly or by chance.

The accompanying inspectors' commentaries across the probation and youth justice cases were analysed thematically. Random samples of commentary were analysed until themes began to repeat and the process of analysis appeared exhausted.

SPO survey

A survey of SPOs was undertaken for the thematic inspection of the SPO role and management oversight (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024). The questions covered the key areas of operational delivery, management oversight policy, and their experience of the role.

392 SPOs completed the survey, which represents about one in four (27 per cent) of the 1,435 full-time equivalent SPOs working for the Probation Service on 31 March 2023. Respondent characteristics were as follows:

- 95 per cent had worked in probation for over five years
- 85 per cent worked full-time hours
- 78 per cent were aged over 40 years
- 77 per cent were women
- 92 per cent[10] recorded their ethnicity as white.

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[10] Of those who answered the question (76 per cent).

For the open-ended textual responses to the survey, thematic analysis was again undertaken.

Realist review

A realist review into effective management practice in probation and youth justice was undertaken by Manchester Metropolitan University. The approach involved starting with a 'rough initial theory', then conducting a systematic but targeted review of literature to 'test' this rough theory, and, finally, re-articulating the 'rough initial theory' in light of the current evidence base.

The final theories are presented in the form of Context-Mechanism-Outcome configurations (CMOs):

- the 'context' of an intervention or programme relates to the conditions in which it is undertaken. This can relate to a range of features including cultural, social or geographical features; place or space of implementation; or the make-up of the participants

- a 'mechanism' explains what it is about an intervention or programme that makes it work. Identifying and articulating the relevant mechanism can prove complex and can be dependent on the outcome of interest whilst being shaped by the context.

- in some respects, the term 'outcome' is self-explanatory. However, the desired outcome can differ depending on the perspective of the different people involved. For example, the desired outcome for a senior leader or manager might be different to that for a front-line member of staff.

Annex B: Inspection analysis outputs

Table B1: Probation cases – key question responses by effectiveness of management oversight

Key question	% yes response to key question judgement where	
	management oversight was effective (max n=408)	management oversight was insufficient, ineffective, or absent (max n=1,028)
Does assessment focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	77%	51%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on the factors linked to offending and desistance?	83%	49%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	58%	21%
Does planning focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	78%	45%
Does planning focus sufficiently on reducing reoffending and supporting desistance	80%	49%
Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	69%	29%
Is the sentence or post-custody period implemented effectively with a focus on engaging the person on probation?	82%	43%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support desistance?	72%	31%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?	68%	20%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting the compliance and engagement of the person on probation?	88%	50%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting desistance?	80%	41%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	72%	28%

N.B. Shaded cells indicate that the difference was significant ($p < 0.05$; based upon logistic regression models which also included individual/case information variables).

Table B2: Probation cases – effectiveness of management oversight by individual/case characteristics

Individual/case characteristic		In the opinion of the inspector, does management oversight meet the needs of the case?	
		n	% yes
All cases		1,438	28%
Age group	18 to 24 years	217	29%
	25 to 39 years	749	27%
	40 to 59 years	426	28%
	60 or older years	39	44%
Gender	Male	1,216	29%
	Female	184	28%
Ethnicity	White	1,073	30%
	Black	102	23%
	Asian	86	33%
	Mixed ethnicity	53	26%
	Other	104	13%
Disability status	Not disabled	611	29%
	Disabled	682	30%
Number of previous sanctions	None	225	27%
	1	143	29%
	2 - 5	312	29%
	6 - 10	229	29%
	11 - 20	248	31%
	21+	271	27%
Type of case	Community	791	27%
	Post-release	498	32%
Likelihood of reoffending	Low	797	29%
	Medium	335	28%
	High	203	34%
	Very high	37	19%
Risk of serious harm	Low	280	23%
	Medium	817	27%
	High/Very High	240	45%

N.B. Shaded cells indicate that sub-group differences were significant (p<0.05; based upon logistic regression models which included all the individual/case information variables).

Table B3: Youth court disposal cases – key question responses by effectiveness of management oversight

Key question	% yes response to key question judgement where	
	management oversight was effective (n=312)	management oversight was ineffective (n=213)
Does assessment sufficiently analyse how to support the child's desistance?	94%	71%
Does assessment sufficiently analyse how to keep the child safe?	89%	49%
Does assessment sufficiently analyse how to keep other people safe?	87%	46%
Does planning focus sufficiently on supporting the child's desistance?	92%	69%
Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping the child safe?	88%	50%
Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping people safe?	83%	45%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the child's desistance?	93%	63%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of the child?	94%	48%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?	88%	44%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting the child's desistance?	95%	63%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping the child safe?	88%	54%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	85%	45%

N.B. Shaded cells indicate that the difference was significant (p<0.05; based upon logistic regression models which also included individual/case information variables).

Table B4: Youth court disposal cases – effectiveness of management oversight by individual/case characteristics

Individual/case characteristic		In the opinion of the inspector, does management oversight meet the needs of the case?	
		n	% yes
All cases		525	59%
Age group	12 to 15 years	92	52%
	15 to 16 years	303	61%
	17 and older	127	61%
Gender	Male	460	60%
	Female	64	52%
Ethnicity	White	371	58%
	Black	47	57%
	Asian	32	59%
	Mixed	61	70%
	Other	9	89%
Looked After Child	Yes	144	57%
	No	377	60%
Number of previous sanctions	None	199	64%
	1	104	55%
	2+	208	56%
Safety and wellbeing classification	Low	78	56%
	Medium	205	54%
	High/Very high	240	65%
Risk of serious harm classification	Low	100	59%
	Medium	276	58%
	High/Very high	146	63%

N.B. Shaded cells indicate that sub-group differences were significant ($p<0.05$; based upon logistic regression models which included all the individual/case information variables).

Table B5: Youth out-of-court disposal cases – key question responses by effectiveness of management oversight

Key question	% yes response to key question judgement where	
	management oversight was effective (n=454)	management oversight was ineffective (n=266)
Does assessment sufficiently analyse how to support the child's desistance?	93%	59%
Does assessment sufficiently analyse how to keep the child safe?	84%	38%
Does assessment sufficiently analyse how to keep other people safe?	81%	41%
Does planning focus sufficiently on supporting the child's desistance?	95%	65%
Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping the child safe?	86%	48%
Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping people safe?	88%	58%
Does service delivery effectively support the child's desistance?	95%	58%
Does service delivery effectively support the safety of the child?	90%	45%
Does service delivery effectively support the safety of other people?	91%	55%

N.B. Shaded cells indicate that the difference was significant (p<0.05; based upon logistic regression models which also included individual/case information variables).

Table B6: Youth out-of-court disposal cases – effectiveness of management oversight by individual/case characteristics

Individual/case characteristic		In the opinion of the inspector, does management oversight meet the needs of the case?	
		n	% yes
All cases		720	63%
Age group	10 to 14 years	227	62%
	15 to 16 years	305	64%
	17 and older	185	63%
Gender	Female	157	62%
	Male	557	63%
Ethnicity	White	550	65%
	Black	40	55%
	Asian	45	60%
	Mixed	58	60%
	Other	20	55%
Looked After Child	Yes	99	62%
	No	606	63%
Number of previous sanctions	None	501	64%
	1	109	62%
	2+	83	60%
Safety and wellbeing classification	Low	206	57%
	Medium	327	65%
	High/Very high	145	74%
Risk of serious harm classification	Low	348	59%
	Medium	276	68%
	High/Very high	55	76%

N.B. Shaded cells indicate that sub-group differences were significant (p<0.05; based upon logistic regression models which included all the individual/case information variables).

Annex C: Headlines from the realist review by Manchester Metropolitan University

In a 'realist review' process, the approach to understanding how programmes work is that 'causal outcomes follow from mechanisms acting in contexts' (Pawson and Tilley 1997, p. 58). The Manchester Metropolitan University team developed five such Context – Mechanism – Outcome (CMO) configurations to explain how effective management in probation and youth justice could operate.

CMO 1 OVERSIGHT: Effective middle management as ensuring consistency and defensibility of practice

- Effective middle management requires oversight to ensure that legal and organisational requirements are adhered to by frontline practitioners. The process of oversight is intended to ensure consistency and defensibility of practice to address potential public scrutiny and inspection.

CMO 2 CLINICAL SUPERVISION: Effective middle management as supporting practitioners address trauma

- Effective middle management enables the trauma of frontline practice to be considered to improve practice, case management and staff wellbeing.

CMO 3 REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: Effective middle management as building practitioner confidence and expertise

- Relational practice requires time dedicated to facilitated self-reflection through a trusted and experienced practitioner. This is intended to build frontline practitioner confidence and expertise.

CMO 4 SENIOR PRACTITIONER: Effective middle management as guiding practitioners' day to day practice

- (Less experienced) frontline practitioners require access to practice wisdom to inform and guide day to day practice. This is intended to ensure appropriate decisions are made on individual cases managed by practitioners.

CMO 5 SELF-MANAGING TEAMS: Autonomous groups of individuals who have the authority and responsibility to make decisions regarding their work processes and goals

- In the absence of access to practice wisdom from an assigned experienced practitioner, frontline staff informally and formally organise to share experiences and learn from each other. This is intended to inform and improve their day-to-day practice and general practice.

The realist review concludes that there is a need for the criminal justice sector to engage more with researchers working in public management/administration. It is proposed that development of the evidence base would be facilitated through:

- further studies defining, implementing and evaluating a reflective practice staff supervision model

- further studies defining, implementing and evaluating an effective model for supporting staff in relation to the impact of secondary trauma

- a rigorous pilot and evaluation of a senior practitioner role, preceding any wider roll-out of this model

- an exploration of the desirability and feasibility of self-managing teams prior to undertaking a pilot.