



HM Inspectorate  
of Probation

# **The role of the senior probation officer and management oversight in the Probation Service**

An inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation  
January 2024

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## Foreword

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The Probation Service manages a complex and challenging caseload. The work of probation practitioners in court and sentence management teams is fundamental to the Service's ability to protect the public. Our probation inspection programme found that, where it was required, the quality of management oversight was insufficient in 72 per cent of the inspected cases. It is therefore vital that effective management oversight arrangements are in place. This is currently not the case. We found that management oversight policies are applied inconsistently, and this is underpinned by a defensive operational culture. This undermines the quality of decision-making and the confidence of operational staff and is of serious concern.

A revised framework is required to enable both day-to-day decision-making and the proactive assurance of cases. Only 39 per cent of senior probation officers in our survey believe that the current management oversight policies meet the needs of probation service delivery, and the probation caseload. Lines of responsibility are not clear, and in relation to staff supervision and oversight, policy implementation has not been well coordinated. It is therefore unsurprising that many operational staff lack confidence in the current framework and are uncertain as to their responsibilities.

Operational staff in Wales have responded positively to the introduction of the 'human factors' approach in sentence management. The new operational structure has resulted in a less frenetic working culture and more considered decision-making. The resilience of this structure and its impact on the quality of delivery still need to be evaluated. However, we welcome the proactive arrangements now in place to meet the challenges of the probation caseload.

The senior probation officer role should focus on service delivery, and the management oversight and development of their team. The spans of responsibility of the current role prevent this, and their focus is too often on non-operational tasks. This undermines the senior probation officer's ability to deliver effective management control. Until this is addressed, their focus on operational delivery will continue to be diluted.

We have expressed concerns about the senior probation officer workload in previous reports, and those concerns remain. Internal probation service reviews have also found the workload to be excessive. During this inspection, we met and heard from many senior probation officers who had unacceptably high workloads across a wide range of responsibilities. Additional administrative support has been provided and there has been significant success in filling vacancies. The responsibilities of the role have, however, remained unchanged.

The role of the senior probation officer and arrangements for management oversight in the Probation Service need to be reviewed. This will, now, take place within a merged 'One HMPPS' governance structure for prisons and probation services. It is important that operational staff are consulted meaningfully and that new policies are grounded in the realities of the probation caseload. Our recommendations, if followed, are designed to support senior probation officers to focus on the oversight of work and, in so doing, to improve public protection.



**Sue McAllister**

Interim HM Chief Inspector of Probation  
January 2024

## Contextual facts

### The Probation Service caseload – key statistics

<b>238,264</b>	The number of people on probation serving community orders or pre/post-custody supervision on 30 June 2023 <sup>1</sup>
<b>91,040</b>	The number of people subject to Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) on 31 March 2023, consisting of <b>68,357</b> registered sexual offenders; <b>21,897</b> violent offenders; <b>246</b> convicted terrorist or terrorist risk offenders; and <b>540</b> other dangerous persons. <sup>2</sup> These figures include the category 1 offenders managed by the police as a single agency
<b>24,851</b>	The number of people on licence who were recalled to prison between April 2022 and March 2023. Of these, <b>638</b> were serving an indeterminate sentence for public protection, and <b>370</b> were serving a life sentence <sup>3</sup>
<b>19,993</b>	The number of people on probation with an offender assessment system (OASys) Sexual Predictor – Contact level assessed as medium or high. This indicates the likelihood of a further contact sexual offence within two years <sup>4</sup>

### The Probation Service staff – key statistics

<b>11,219</b>	The number of probation practitioners in post on 30 June 2023, consisting of 4,418 probation officers and 6,801 probation services officers (including trainee probation officers). As of 30 June 2023, there were 2,385 full-time-equivalent (FTE) trainee probation officers in post <sup>4</sup>
<b>1,481</b>	The number of senior probation officers in post on 30 June 2023, a 17.5 per cent increase over the previous year <sup>5</sup>
<b>2,390</b>	The national shortfall of probation officers against a target FTE number of 6,158. This equates to a vacancy rate of 35 per cent <sup>5</sup>
<b>2,102</b>	The number of staff who left the Probation Service in the year to June 2023, a decrease of 2 per cent on the year before <sup>5</sup>
<b>351</b>	The number of probation officers who left the service in the year to June 2023, 65 per cent of whom had over five or more years' experience working in the service <sup>5</sup>
<b>1,514</b>	The number of trainee probation officers recruited in the year 2022/2023 <sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [Offender management statistics quarterly: April to June 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2023)

<sup>2</sup> [Multi-agency public protection arrangements \(MAPPA\) annual: 2022 to 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/multi-agency-public-protection-arrangements-mappa-annual-2022-to-2023)

<sup>3</sup> [Offender Management statistics quarterly: January to March 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-january-to-march-2023)

<sup>4</sup> [HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: June 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-june-2023)

<sup>5</sup> [HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-march-2023)

# Executive summary

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## Context

The role of the senior probation officer (SPO) and the delivery of management oversight are central to effective sentence management and court work in the Probation Service. The probation caseload is complex and challenging. It is therefore important that the teams delivering these key services in courts and the community are supported and that their work is overseen effectively. Since before the unification of the Probation Service, there have been concerns about the workload of SPOs and the effectiveness of management oversight. These concerns have continued following the findings from HM Inspectorate of Probation's core inspection programme 2021–2023 and recent high-profile Serious Further Offence (SFO) independent reviews. The formation of the unified service has seen several policy initiatives in relation to management oversight – notably, the touch points model (TPM) and the reflective practice supervision standards (RPSS). In addition, the Probation Service managerial role review (HMPPS, 2022) considered the pressures and workload of the SPO in sentence management and court teams.

This inspection examined the effectiveness of the current arrangements and policies. It focused on management oversight and the SPO role in sentence management and court work because it is in these teams that the key decisions in relation to risk and public protection are taken. As part of this examination, we considered whether the current operating structure meets the requirement of managing the dynamic probation caseload.

## Methodology

We undertook fieldwork in five probation regions and held focus groups with the key staff groups, including senior staff and operational managers. In the 15 SPO focus groups we met a total of 94 SPOs. In the probation practitioner (PP) focus groups, we met a total of 82 PPs. Fieldwork was also undertaken with senior leaders in the national HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) teams.

We also circulated a national survey to all SPOs which included key questions on management oversight and their responsibilities. A total of 392 SPOs completed this survey, which was 27 per cent of the total number of SPOs in post at that time. In the regions, we also asked SPOs in sentence management and court teams to complete an activity survey. We received 29 responses.

The management oversight data from our core inspection programme was analysed in relation to SPO vacancy rates and spans of control.

## Policy, strategy, and staffing

There is no overall strategy for the delivery of effective management oversight in the Probation Service. Different management oversight frameworks for casework and performance management have been introduced, but not as part of a coherent framework. This has contributed to the confusion and uncertainty felt by operational staff. In the future, sentence management and courts will sit in the chief probation officer's directorate, which will have responsibility for management oversight policy. It is important that the views of frontline staff and an understanding of the probation caseload inform decision-making in the new structure.

Following a cultural assessment of the organisation, the probation service in Wales has adopted a learning organisation model. Central to this is the implementation of a 'human factors' approach in the sentence management teams. A premise of the approach is that humans are fallible, and errors are to be expected, even in the best organisations. The analysis of culture and clarity of communication that supported implementation in Wales is impressive and has helped to embed it in the organisation. Sustaining this change and learning from the experience will now be key. More widely, regional leaders are cautious, doubting that there is an appetite, nationally, for the adoption of a systems-based approach to learning.

Staffing levels for SPOs and PPs have improved but the Probation Service has an inexperienced workforce. This contributes to the dependence and lack of confidence of PPs. Some regions continue to experience high vacancy levels. This inevitably increases the stress on teams, directly affecting the availability, and quality, of management oversight.

### **The effectiveness of management oversight in sentence management and court teams**

Overall, we found a reactive management oversight culture. SPOs are generally dependent on PPs raising concerns with them before they examine a case. One-to-one supervision meetings between SPOs and PPs have a broad agenda, restricting the time available to review cases. Only 39 per cent of SPO respondents working in sentence management thought that the current management oversight policies met the needs of probation service delivery and the probation caseload.

The implementation of the TPM and the RPSS varied across the regions. The TPM ensures that all cases are reviewed by an SPO at some point during the management of the case. However, the model is inflexible, and this can precipitate unnecessary management activity. It was introduced with complex recording instructions which are used inconsistently across the regions. In most of the inspected regions, there was little evidence that planned RPSS sessions were taking place.

In the inspected English regions, we were told that a culture of fear was becoming embedded. This is driven primarily by the fear of SFOs and the consequent need to evidence management oversight activity. This undermines the confidence of PPs, and the effectiveness and quality of management oversight practice. The SPO review (HMPPS, 2020) recognised that the demand placed on SPOs to countersign work was excessive. A countersigning framework was introduced in February 2022 and relaunched in May 2023. However, this has not reduced the burden.

The human factors approach in Wales has improved team communication and provides a more responsive approach to the oversight of cases. Morning check-in meetings and SPO protected hours are now central to operational delivery. This provides a more effective model for managing the probation caseload, particularly in relation to changes in the level of risk of serious harm. It allows for, and anticipates, crises in line with the often complex, challenging, non-compliant reality of the individuals managed.

The demands of the court environment are recognised in the management oversight arrangements for court teams. These teams have a large proportion of probation services officers (PSOs) working in them and they could consult either an SPO or a probation officer on matters such as the risk of serious harm or curfew requirements. However, the gatekeeping arrangements for court reports are inconsistent. This is partly due to staffing levels, but also the demands of the court's timescale. However, all reports on individuals assessed as presenting a high risk of serious harm are gatekept by a qualified PP or SPO.

### **The SPO role and the operational structure**

The current management structure and arrangements for the delivery of sentence management do not enable effective management oversight. The structure does not anticipate the demands, or the complexities, of the probation caseload. It is dependent on SPOs being available to make decisions when crises arise. The nature of the caseload means that key management consultations and decisions are needed outside of planned oversight meetings, and the operational arrangements for sentence management should reflect this requirement.

The SPO span of responsibility includes non-operational tasks, such as facilities management and health and safety. There has been an improvement to the support given to SPOs with the introduction of the case administrator and the relaunch of the managerial hubs for human resources (HR) issues. However, in our national survey, only 17 per cent of sentence management SPOs said that they had time to deliver effective management oversight on cases.

Unlike the English regions, in Wales the quality development officer (QDO) is located within the probation delivery unit (PDU) structure. Under this line management arrangement, they are

involved more directly in operational delivery and more able to look at specific areas of practice relevant to the PDU teams.

There is no national SPO induction and training programme. The English regions and Wales have developed their own induction and development programmes. A Civil Service e-learning package on generic management skills is available, alongside the recently launched HMPPS 'people manager handbook'. However, these arrangements do not fully meet the requirements of the SPO role's demands and complexity.



## Recommendations

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### **HM Prison and Probation Service should:**

1. ensure that HMPPS delivers a clear policy framework for management oversight and first-tier assurance that meets the demands of the probation caseload
2. ensure that effective management oversight arrangements are in place at the regional and PDU level to assure the quality of work to protect the public
3. review the business support functions in relation to facilities management and human resources, to ensure that SPOs are focused on the management oversight of casework
4. design and implement a comprehensive induction and professional development programme for all SPOs working in sentence management and the courts
5. fully evaluate the human factors approach adopted in Wales and consider implementing it across the English regions
6. review the operating model to consider locating QDOs within the PDU governance structure, in line with the approach taken in Wales.

# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Why this thematic?

The probation caseload requires effective management oversight, supported by clear policies and procedures. Our 2021–2023 probation inspection programme found the quality of management oversight, where required, to be insufficient in 72 per cent of the inspected cases (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023). The findings from the Bendall (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023) and McSweeney (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023) independent reviews identified concerns in relation to oversight of casework, enforcement decision-making, and the senior probation officer (SPO) workload.

This thematic inspection allowed us to examine the quality of management oversight and its impact both on the management of cases and staff wellbeing. It also considered the frontline management role and responsibilities of SPOs working in sentence management and the court teams, paying particular attention to the policy and practice expectations of HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). We wanted to know whether the current arrangements enabled the management of complex, and often dangerous, individuals effectively in the community.

## 1.2 Background

### Definitions

The following definitions for management oversight and staff supervision are used in the report:

- *Management oversight*: this is defined as the formal process by which a manager, most often an SPO, assures themselves that operational delivery is undertaken consistently and to the required standard. This is in line with the definition used by HMPPS. Management oversight may include formal and informal meetings between the SPO and the probation practitioner (PP). Similarly, countersigning activities, such as those for the offender assessment system (OASys),<sup>6</sup> are part of the management oversight framework.
- *Staff supervision*: this refers to the formal one-to-one meetings which SPOs hold with PPs. These meetings are used for reviewing cases, addressing performance issues, and dealing with staff wellbeing.
- *Tiers of assurance*: this is the framework used by the Probation Service to assure the quality of service-delivery. 'First-tier assurance' is the way that risks are managed at the point of delivery or day to day. 'Second-tier assurance' refers to internal quality assurance that is independent of the operational line – for example, by the operational and system assurance group (OSAG). 'Third-tier assurance' refers to independent, external assurance, including inspection.

Annexe 1 contains a glossary of the acronyms used in this report.

### Management oversight and staff supervision policies

The key management oversight and staff supervision policies in the probation service are:

- The touch points model (TPM): the TPM was introduced by the National Probation Service (NPS) in February 2021 and was adopted subsequently by the reunified Probation Service in June of that year.<sup>7</sup> The model is central to management oversight in sentence management teams. It directs a minimum level of management oversight but states that the actual level

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<sup>6</sup> OASys is the structured assessment tool used by probation practitioners to assess the risk and needs of people on probation.

<sup>7</sup> In Wales, the unification of probation services took place in December 2019. In England, it took place in June 2021.

should be based on professional judgement and in proportion to the risk and complexity of the case.

- Reflective practice supervision standards (RPSS): this is a formal process of facilitated reflection on cases within planned meetings between the PP and their SPO. It is a person-centred approach that aims to provide time for practitioners to reflect on their practice and professional development. The RPSS were developed from the supervisory and line management meetings framework implemented by the legacy NPS in 2018. RPSS were introduced to the unified Probation Service in May 2022. The RPSS are underpinned by skills for effective engagement, development, and supervision (SEEDS). This provides the overall framework for RPSS, including training courses for both SPOs and PPs.
- Performance management framework (PMF): this is a formal process introduced by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) in April 2022 to guide performance reviews. It directs regular discussion between the manager and staff members to review and support individual performance.
- Competency-based pay progression framework (CBF): this is the annual pay progression process, introduced by HMPPS in December 2022. This directs probation staff to attend designated meetings with their manager and to undertake agreed activities to demonstrate their competence. It is used to decide whether a staff member moves up the pay scale.
- OASys countersigning framework: this was introduced in February 2022 to provide a national countersigning policy for OASys. It introduced new roles and rules, with the aim of reducing the volume of countersigning and improving practice.
- Three HMPPS reviews have informed the development of policy and practice in this area – the SPO review (HMPPS, 2020), the managerial role review (HMPPS, 2022), and the review of the TPM (HMPPS, 2023).

## **The SPO role**

The SPO role in court teams and sentence management, where it oversees the supervision of cases, is complex and many-faceted. The responsibilities include line management, team management, and external partnership relationships, as well as management oversight.

The SPO role and workload have been the subject of concern since 2020, when an internal report commissioned by the NPS was produced (HMPPS, 2020). The SPO review included staff engagement events and 85 SPOs contributing to a time and motion exercise. It highlighted that the SPO's workload nationally was over capacity, and that this affected the consistency of management oversight. Among the recommendations were smarter working practices; OASys digital and practice changes; and an increase in the number of SPOs. The review also led to the national implementation of the TPM in 2021.

Following the unification of the Probation Service in 2021, concerns about the role and workload of SPOs remained. HM Inspectorate of Probation inspections of probation delivery units (PDUs) found the management oversight of cases to be insufficient and the workload of SPOs to be excessive. The probation workforce programme's (PWP) managerial role review in 2022, also highlighted the workload pressures on the SPO role. It made 40 recommendations to improve capacity and efficiency for SPOs in sentence management and court teams. This included the provision of additional administrative support, improvements in management development programmes, and the prioritisation of recruitment.

### 1.3 Core inspection findings 2021–2023

HM Inspectorate of Probation inspects the quality of management oversight against three categories of oversight:<sup>8</sup>

- quality assurance of processes
- management oversight through supervision
- management oversight of immediate risk.

A total of 1,726 community-based probation cases were inspected as part of our 2021–2023 core inspection programme. The inspection case assessment contains the following question on management oversight:

- *How would you describe management oversight in the case?*

The overall findings are shown in Table1.

How would you (the inspector) describe management oversight in the case?	Number	%
Management oversight was effective	461	28%
Management oversight was insufficient, ineffective, or absent	1,168	72%
No management oversight was required	97	-

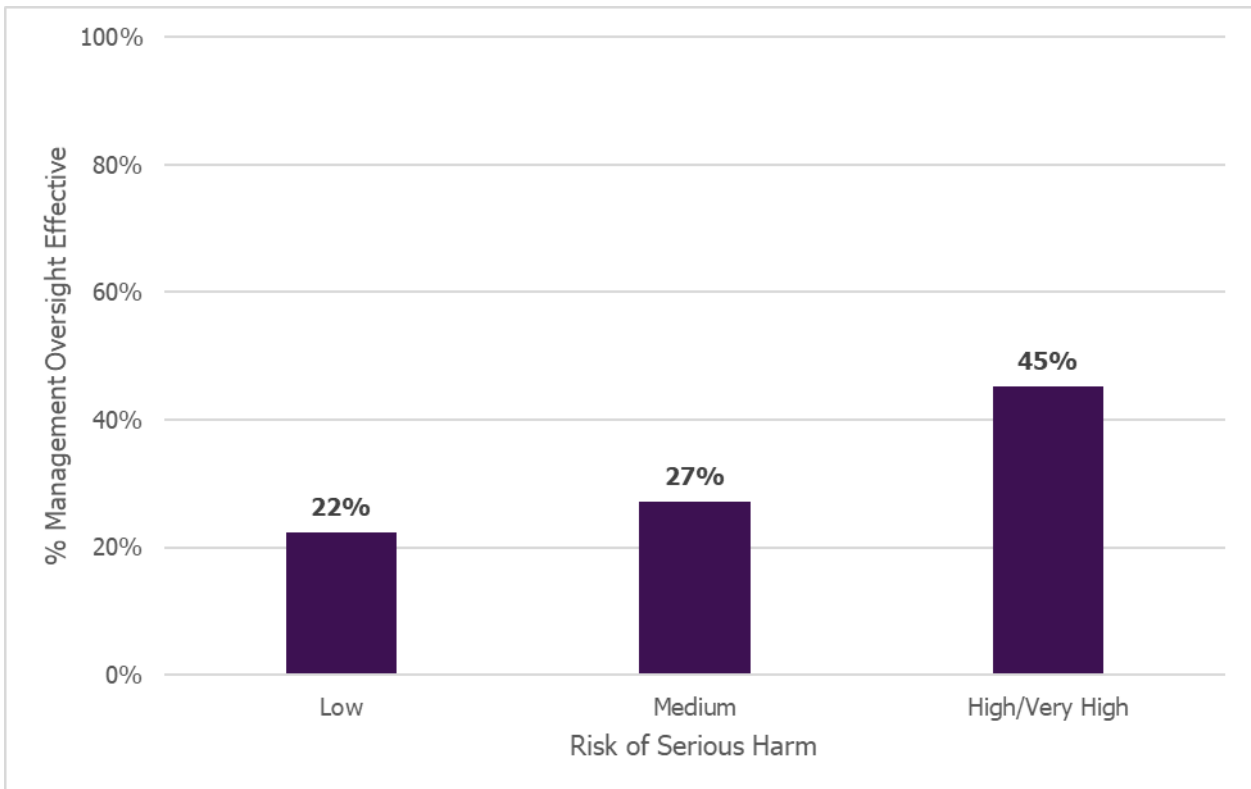
**Table1.** Inspector judgements for effective management oversight

As shown above, management oversight, where required, was found to be insufficient, ineffective, or absent in 72 per cent of cases. This was often linked to inappropriate actions and decision-making in relation to safeguarding and enforcement concerns. Rather than a proactive approach to management oversight, inspectors found an over-dependence on PPs to raise concerns.

Where cases had a positive rating for management oversight, it was associated with positive ratings for the management of the case generally. There was also a noticeable improvement in the quality of management oversight for cases assessed as high risk of serious harm – as shown below (Figure 1). Although the sufficiency rating remains low, it highlights that SPOs prioritise these cases for management oversight.

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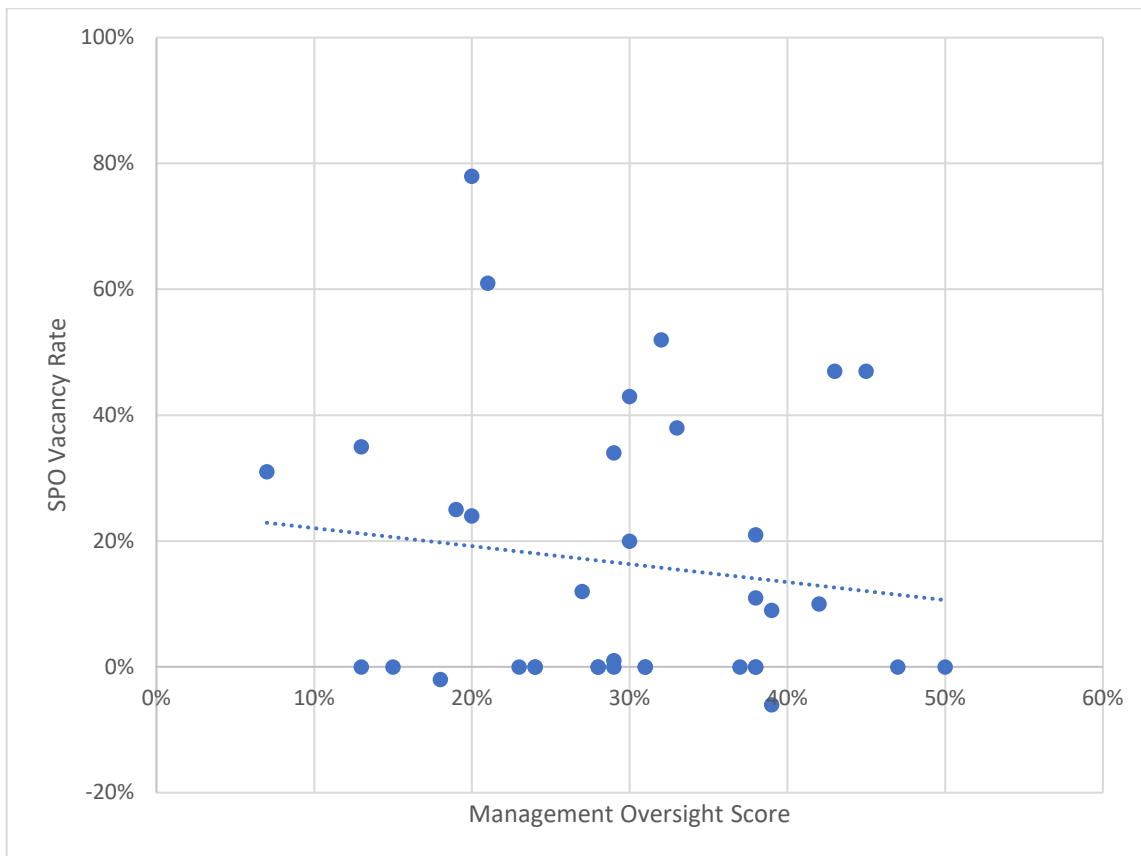
<sup>8</sup> HM Inspectorate of Probation published guidance on the key principles of management oversight including the identification of these three categories, in 2022.



**Figure 1.** Inspector judgements of effective management oversight (% positive) by risk of serious harm classification

A focus of the SPO review and the managerial role review was the impact of an SPO's span of control on their ability to provide management oversight. The current Probation Service operating model sets the span of control at 1:10 for sentence management teams and 1:12 for court teams. This modelling relates to full-time-equivalent (FTE) PPs. Given the number of PPs who work part time, the number of people that SPOs manage will often be in excess of the target FTE number. The number of staff that SPOs manage will inevitably influence their ability to deliver effective management oversight. However, when our PDU inspection findings were analysed, there was no clear pattern of how the span of control affected the quality of management oversight.

We also considered the potential relationship between the SPO vacancy rates in PDUs and the management oversight scores. There was no clear evidence of a relationship between vacancy rates and management oversight. However, there was some indication that management oversight scores were higher where vacancy rates were lower (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** PDU management oversight scores and SPO vacancy rates

### 1.4 Aims and objectives

The inspection sought to answer the following questions:

- Do the policies, strategy, and arrangements for management oversight enable the delivery of an effective service?
- Do the operational structure and arrangements for management oversight enable the delivery of an effective service?
- Does the oversight of work support high-quality delivery and professional development?
- Do the skills of managers support the provision of effective management oversight?
- Does management oversight enable the effective management of the risk of serious harm?
- Do the policies and arrangements for management oversight help drive improvements in multi-agency working?

## 2. Policy, strategy, and staffing

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In this chapter, we consider the impact of national policy, strategy, and staffing on the management oversight of frontline work.

### 2.1. Policy implementation and strategy

Since 2021, staff supervision and management oversight have been the subject of a series of policy initiatives in the Probation Service. The SPO role has been central to their implementation. The unification of the service<sup>9</sup> and the need to ensure consistent practice partly explain the reason why so many different policies were launched over a relatively short period of time. The policies were implemented by different parts of the MoJ and HMPPS. However, there was little evidence of these policy initiatives being coordinated. For example, the PMF came from the MoJ; the TPM, OASys countersigning framework, and RPSS came from the effective practice and service improvement group (EPSIG); and the CBF came from the PWP. Each of these policies directed significant tasks and responsibilities for managers and operational staff. The communication of the policies by the probation regions included briefings and workshops. However, this was a particularly pressurised period for the service, following the Covid-19 pandemic and unification. The inspection found that, at an operational level, these policies were inconsistently understood and adhered to. This was recognised by many senior leaders. One stated:

*“I think the policies are too complicated, there’s too many, they’re not being followed. I couldn’t even articulate in a simple way how an SPO is expected to follow them.”*

The responsibility for coordinating management oversight policy and decision-making was also unclear. One senior leader told us:

*“It’s a very complicated picture at the centre, to the point where I don’t have absolute clarity.”*

The lack of policy coordination adds directly to the pressures experienced by SPOs in sentence management and court teams. Many SPOs believed that policy makers had little understanding of frontline practice. In our SPO survey, only nine per cent of sentence management SPOs, believed that policy makers and senior managers understood the impact of their decisions on the frontline. The SPO review (HMPPS, 2020), managerial role review (HMPPS, 2022), and TPM review (HMPPS, 2023) involved widespread consultation with frontline staff. However, generally, there has been minimal consultation on either the implementation or applicability of policy initiatives. Significantly, only 39 per cent of SPO respondents believed that the current management oversight policies meet the needs of probation delivery and the probation caseload. Comments from SPOs included:

*“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 to bring issues to us for discussion.”*

*“In theory, management oversight should support staff's wellbeing and enable risk management, but it currently feels, both for SPOs and staff, that this is currently ‘a tick box’ exercise and an overly arduous task that cannot be done to the correct level.”*

The lack of drive that the complex governance structure brings to improving management oversight practice is evident from the response to the TPM review. This review was commissioned by the PWP following its completion of the managerial role review. The TPM review was first presented to the Probation Service strategy, performance, and quality board, from where it was referred to the chief probation officer. The findings of the review were significant. It highlighted the increase in the SPO’s workload and the inflexibility of the model in relation to the prioritisation of cases. It

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<sup>9</sup> In Wales, the unification of the probation services took place in December 2019. In England, it took place in June 2021.

recommended the decommissioning of the TPM and its replacement with a more flexible model. There had been no progress on the TPM review's recommendations at the time of our inspection.

We were told that, under the proposed One HMPPS structure, sentence management responsibility will sit in the chief probation officer's directorate and the governance arrangements will be simplified. In our view, the priorities of any new national structure must include the streamlining of decision-making; improved consultation with operational staff; and the ending of the current 'top-down' method of policy implementation.

## 2.2. The learning organisation approach in Wales

In Wales Probation Service, senior leaders have implemented a 'learning organisation' approach in a bid to transform the operational culture and to improve service delivery. This has been supported by the EPSIG human factors project team and has involved extensive engagement with staff. The human factors structure adopted in sentence management is one of the five strands of the learning organisation model. The others are the development of a shared mental model; culture measurement; culture enquiry; and leadership and team development. The development of the model has required a comprehensive assessment of organisational culture and the investment of the whole management group. One senior manager stated that:

*"You cannot drop this method out of the sky and hope that it works."*

Senior managers recognise that the stability and low vacancy rates of their staff group have eased the implementation of the model. However, they are also clear that the performance and practice issues they sought to address in Wales could not be solved simply by lower staff vacancy rates. The organisational culture and structure needed to change. Fundamental to this was the development of a more bottom-up culture in the organisation, and this is intrinsic to the human factors approach.

The beginnings of a less frenetic, more considered working culture in Wales, was evident across all sentence management staff groups. One senior manager said:

*"The cultural assessment found that everyone was in a heightened mode of crisis ... what we're saying is, yes, we can respond to crisis but we're not living in a crisis ... this isn't a warzone. We can do planned work. But when we do need to jump and react, we do that in a calm and collected space."*

While the resilience of the new sentence management structure has not been tested over a sustained period, PPs valued the more responsive approach to the oversight of their work. A bespoke approach will be developed for court teams and a comprehensive evaluation is required. However, we were impressed by the ability of the structure to respond proactively to the probation caseload.

A further pilot of the human factors approach is planned, and some steps are being taken nationally to take this approach to practice development. For example, the approach is central to the new recall process and procedures. However, regional leaders are cautious about its adoption. A premise of the approach is that humans are fallible, and errors are to be expected, even in the best organisations. In essence, this means that failings in case management should be seen systemically rather than individually. Senior managers are clear that negligent practice should be held to account, but many doubted that there was the appetite, nationally, for the adoption of a systems-based approach to learning. One senior regional manager was very clear:

*"There would need to be a commitment all the way through the organisation to make it effective ... I don't want to give staff a false sense of security of no blame when the reality is that a very high-profile SFO might result in a very different stance."*



## 2.2 Staffing arrangements and management oversight

Staff vacancies and staff inexperience are not the primary reasons for the reactive and inconsistent management oversight practice we found during the inspection. However, they contribute significantly to the pressure on operational teams. Fifty per cent of the SPOs in one of the inspected region's PDUs had been in post for less than a year, and a third of the PPs had less than two years' post-qualification experience. This level of inexperience will inevitably make additional demands on SPOs and impact on their ability to provide management oversight across their teams. In our national survey, one SPO described the impact:

*"The lack of experience means that I am constantly in demand ... Sadly, there are 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."*

The number of PO vacancies adds to the pressures on SPOs and operational teams. On 30 June 2023, the national vacancy rate was 35 per cent, which represents a shortfall of 2,390 POs against the target staffing figure. In 2022/2023, 1,514 staff undertaking the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiPs) were recruited to help fill these vacancies. However, there has been a 17 per cent withdrawal rate from PQiP courses that began in 2021/2022 and have now completed. Although this includes both individuals leaving HMPPS and those leaving courses but remaining in HMPPS, there is inevitable concern about how long high vacancy rates might continue. The recruitment of so many trainee POs adds to the inexperience of the probation teams. In most regions, responsibility for the management oversight of PQiPs rests primarily with the designated PQiP SPOs.

At both national and regional level, the demands and pressures of the SPO role have been recognised. As a result, there has been a concerted effort to prioritise SPO recruitment. This has seen some significant success. Over the year to June 2023, there was an 18 per cent increase in SPOs. However, this is a largely inexperienced staff group. Sixty-four per cent of sentence management SPOs have over five years' experience in the Probation Service, but a significant majority have been in the SPO role for less than two years.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.3 Conclusions and implications

The lack of a clear governance structure at national level has contributed to the confusion of operational staff and helps to explain why policies have been implemented inconsistently. Staff do not feel that they have been consulted and this has undermined their confidence in the management oversight framework. A new governance framework will be put in place under the 'One HMPPS' structure, with both sentence management and court work falling within the chief probation officer's directorate. Following the TPM review, there are important decisions to be made about the expectations in relation to management oversight. The views of frontline staff, and an understanding of the caseload profile, must inform these decisions.

The learning organisation approach adopted in Wales is enabling more considered, less pressurised decision-making in sentence management teams. The resilience of the approach needs to be tested over a sustained period, and future pilots will provide more evidence about the sustainability of its impact.

Staffing levels at SPO and PSO level have improved, but at probation officer (PO) level, the Probation Service has an inexperienced workforce. This contributes to the dependence and lack of confidence at PP level. The large number of PQiPs should ensure that the number of qualified PPs will also increase. Some regions continue to experience high vacancy levels, and this inevitably increases the stress on teams, which affects the availability, and quality, of management oversight.

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<sup>10</sup> Information provided by the probation workforce programme during the inspection.

## 3 The effectiveness of management oversight

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In this chapter, we consider the application of the different management oversight policies in sentence management and court teams. We also consider the quality assurance processes in place.

### 3.1 Management oversight in sentence management teams

Sentence management teams are responsible for the management of cases in the Probation Service. PPs in these teams are responsible for supervising the individuals on probation directly and making the key decisions in relation to the level of risk of serious harm, service interventions, and the enforcement of licences and orders. The profile of the probation caseload makes this a challenging and pressurised role. Individuals managed by the Probation Service are either sentenced to community orders by the courts or released on licence as part of their prison sentence. Many have complex needs and challenging histories. Compliance and cooperation with supervision arrangements cannot be assumed and they may be unmotivated to accept help to address their problems. Some may actively misdirect, attempt to intimidate, or manipulate their PP. The independent reviews of Joseph McCann (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2020), Damien Bendall (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023), and Jordan McSweeney (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023) evidence these challenges. Consequently, it is fundamental to the effective supervision of a case that management oversight policies and practice are fit for purpose.

Management oversight covers a range of activities, including the provision of management oversight in line with the TPM and RPSS policies. It also includes activities such as countersigning OASys assessments and reports; reviewing MAPPA and lifer cases; and dealing with immediate queries on a day-to-day basis. The practice requirements detailed in the sentence management in the community policy framework (HMPPS, 2023) make it clear that management oversight is a shared responsibility between the SPO and the PP. It states:

*‘Both practitioners and managers must evidence sound decision-making, ensuring that reflection, professional discussion, and appropriate oversight take place as part of a holistic approach to sentence management.’*

We found that the number and staggered implementation of key policies have resulted in confusion among probation staff. SPOs and PPs are uncertain in relation to both the policy expectations and their responsibilities. SPOs have largely continued with their established management oversight practice and attempted to incorporate the new initiatives where possible. One SPO stated:

*“I just hold supervision with staff, at six-weekly intervals, as I have always done, and try to incorporate the policies into this meeting, but it is not really possible. I try to cover touch points and have reflective discussions on cases; however, my main focus is trying to cover any case where there are immediate concerns or increases in risk of serious harm. It’s frantic and fast but ultimately we’re expected to manage risk.”*

#### The application of the TPM

The TPM was designed to provide managers with a framework from which they could focus management oversight activity and be assured of the consistency of operational delivery. It does not mandate how the touch point discussions between the SPO and PP should take place but does direct that they are recorded. The policy emphasises that the overall levels of management oversight should be responsive to the risk and complexity of a case. A recording format on nDelius<sup>11</sup> was introduced to enable SPOs to record the type and outcome of the touch point undertaken. A TPM management information report was also introduced.

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<sup>11</sup> nDelius is the casework recording system used by the Probation Service.

The application of the TPM across the regions is inconsistent, although some SPOs welcomed the framework as it provides a structure which ensures that cases are reviewed. The TPM performance dashboard identifies cases that managers have not looked at. It was recognised that the model attempts to instil a proactive approach to the oversight of cases, but in practice we heard that it was helping to drive a defensive and dependent culture. The initial touch point conversation at the start of probation supervision was valued by most SPOs and PPs. SPOs endeavoured to ensure that high risk of harm cases, are reviewed quarterly. However, there was evidence that some PPs only requested touch point conversations to endorse their decision-making. This formulaic approach to supervision has also been identified in SFO reviews (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023). Reference was repeatedly made to the need to ensure that management oversight is recorded, in order to 'back cover' in the event of an SFO. This widespread anxiety among PPs has an adverse impact on the culture of sentence management. One PP stated:

*"Fear of SFOs makes me request management oversight. It makes decisions defensible – it is the back-up you need, reassurance; it's not that I am not confident to make decisions, I just want that back-up so I can make sure we're all on Panorama together."*

This culture places additional demands on SPOs and can result in more immediate, and less considered, decision-making. Comments from SPOs included:

*"They want management oversight to protect themselves. I think it's allowing practitioners to be deskilled to the point where we might as well allocate cases to SPOs. There's a danger that we become checkers. It's fear that's driving it. A lot of management oversight is recorded just in case there's an SFO."*

*"You don't have sufficient time to consider all of the management oversights adequately and record something useful. People send emails saying they'd like a management oversight recorded on a case or knock on my door, but it gets pretty difficult to make sure I get them all done."*

The confused understanding and ineffective application of the model was underlined by the information provided in advance and during the inspection. The recording of management oversight varied significantly, both between and within regions. The implementation of TPM was accompanied by overcomplicated case recording instructions for nDelius. It includes options for six management oversight types and 13 management oversight outcomes. It was evident that there is no consistency in how management oversight is recorded under these headings. For example, in some PDUs, many discussions were recorded under 'management oversight supervision discussion' while in others they were recorded under 'management oversight risk discussion.'

### **The application of reflective practice supervision standards**

The initial expectation was that SPOs would undertake six reflective practice supervision sessions annually with each member of staff; this has subsequently been reduced to four. Alongside the launch of RPSS, an ongoing evaluation programme to determine its effectiveness is in place. This has designated 16 PDUs across the country as control areas, where RPSS have not been introduced.

The HMPPS sentence management in the community policy framework (HMPPS, 2023) is clear that reflective practice supervision is a management oversight activity.<sup>12</sup> It also emphasises the importance of professional development. The theory behind this dual approach is that by reviewing one complex case in detail, this will develop the skills and practice of the PP across their caseload.

The implementation of SEEDS and reflective practice in the NPS<sup>13</sup> were evaluated by Westaby et al. (2021). This evaluation highlighted that the high workloads of SPOs and PPs had significantly

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<sup>12</sup> Previous practice guidance in *Managing the Touch Points Model and Reflective Supervision Standards* issued in July 2022, also confirmed this.

<sup>13</sup> The NPS had adopted the SEEDS model and introduced reflective practice supervision sessions in 2018.

undermined the implementation of reflective practice. It also highlighted the potential tensions of using reflective practice for both personal development and professional accountability.

Many SPOs have undertaken the SEEDS training, but there was only evidence in Wales and the West Midlands that sessions were taking place. Nationally, only seven per cent of PPs had received reflective supervision in the 12 months prior to June 2023. This, chimes with the findings of Westaby et al. (2021). Many SPOs we met understood the value of reflective discussion, but for most SPOs their high workload meant that they were unable to deliver the formal sessions as envisaged. In light of the current SPO workload and management structure, we do not anticipate this situation changing.

### **One-to-one supervision meetings**

The inspection confirmed that the main mechanism for management oversight continues to be the one-to-one meeting. The purpose of one-to-one meetings is not confined solely to case discussion. The templates and processes brought in by the regions also include staff wellbeing and personal development. The PMF and CBF are also reviewed, along with any concerns about absence management and capability. In a Kent, Surrey, and Sussex (KSS) PDU, the SPOs, supported by their PDU head, had reduced long-term absence from 20 to zero in a period of 12 months. This is a significant achievement and was underpinned by a consistent and systemic approach in applying the policies. Similarly, in the West Midlands, one PDU had identified serious concerns about performance, and 25 per cent of the PPs had been made the subject of either informal or formal performance plans. Absence management and capability issues require a sensitive and professional approach. The amount of management time and energy required to pursue these issues should not be underestimated.

Most SPOs stated that, due to time pressures, they rely on PPs to identify cases for review. The number of cases able to be reviewed in this forum is limited by the time available and the frequency of the meetings. These shortcomings are recognised by both SPOs and PPs. PPs highlighted the need for additional ad hoc access to SPOs for advice on the management of cases.

### **Informal management oversight**

The caseload profile demands that PPs respond to information and events on a day-to-day basis. Changes in behaviour or levels of risk can happen at any time and in some cases require the scrutiny of more than one person. The importance of this ad hoc management oversight was highlighted in the TPM review. The review found that, in relation to risk escalation, responsive management oversight had improved casework in 50 per cent of cases. This compared with only 27 per cent when management oversight took place at a fixed point during a sentence. Management oversight processes must therefore accommodate this flexibility while ensuring sufficient capacity.

We found that SPOs in both courts and sentence management were available to staff, although, apart from in Wales, this was not routinely structured into the working day. SPOs used arrangements such as duty rotas and Microsoft Teams channels. However, many PPs expressed concern about the accessibility of SPOs and how delays sometimes resulted in pressurised decision-making.

For most SPOs, the informal contact with PPs in their teams was an essential tool in managing both staff wellbeing and performance issues. One SPO commented:

*“The priority for me is to try to keep my staff in work. They are so stressed, and their mental health is so bad. They are under so much pressure. I have to prioritise this over what management oversight policies say.”*

The tensions between the level of management oversight and the professional autonomy of PPs have been highlighted in both the managerial role review and the TPM review. Senior managers in the regions recognised that staff were confused about the different management oversight policies, and the pervasive culture of fear. They were also aware of the continued reliance on one-to-one meetings as the primary vehicle for reviewing cases. In recognition of this, the West Midlands had

introduced a One Note process to support SPOs in structuring and sequencing their meetings. This was welcomed by both SPOs and PPs. In other regions, a proforma had been produced, to ensure that the key aspects of management oversight were covered.

### **The implementation of the human factors approach in Wales**

The human factors approach in Wales has had a direct impact on how management oversight operates within sentence management teams. Early morning check-in meetings for all team members have been introduced. The agenda includes workload, team activity, wellbeing, and potential issues that may develop during the day. The meetings allow for tasks to be allocated or reallocated where necessary. The meetings also allow PPs to raise potential concerns with the SPO, and for them to be resolved at this early stage.

Another feature of the human factors approach is the daily protected hour when SPOs are available for consultation.

#### **Good practice example: Wales Probation Service: Daily protected hour and the situation, background, assessment, and recommendation (SBAR)**

The protected hour has been introduced to all sentence management teams in Wales. It is a designated time slot built into each working day, when SPOs are available to discuss cases or other concerns. PPs are clear about when SPOs are available for consultation. In tandem with the early morning check-in meeting, this structural change to operational delivery has reduced anxiety and developed a more planned, less hectic working culture. It has also enabled more considered decision-making.

Aligned to the protected hour has been the introduction of the SBAR approach to case review. PPs are directed to formulate and communicate their concerns about cases by detailing the situation, the background, their assessment, and their recommendation. This can be communicated to managers, either verbally or by email. The aim of this approach is to ensure that the PP identifies the key concerns and considers the case fully, before consulting with a manager. The process also aims to develop professional autonomy and to ensure that consultation with the SPO only takes place when necessary.

Inspectors found that the approach in Wales was having a positive impact on the working culture in the sentence management teams. Both SPOs and PPs commented on the change of pace in relation to decision-making and the development of a more positive team culture. Significantly, SPOs found that the SBAR and protected hour approach had reduced the number of case concerns that PPs raised with them and resulted in greater confidence and better decision-making. One experienced PP said about the SBAR and the protected hour:

*“SBAR helps with crisis management and reactive decision-making. This has improved management oversight of cases. SBAR enables the PP to reflect and there is less pressurised or anxious decision-making ... it has helped with the pace of decision-making.”*

Another PP stated that the new structure:

*“...allows PPs to reflect and to consider cases before discussion – you don’t have to grab the SPO.”*

SPOs were equally positive about the introduction of the new approach. Comments included:

*“The checklist meeting is very useful. Every morning I meet with the team at a set time. You’re encouraging the practitioner to go away and reflect before having a discussion, which means the conversation is far more productive ... the issue can subsequently be presented in the protected hour if necessary. I think practitioners have grabbed onto this SBAR. It’s helped them organise and apply the process to other areas of work.”*

*“It’s been really beneficial for my team to get together and communicate, share workloads and pressures ... the checklist meeting makes us get together and communicate key tasks and availability. We can bring up any cases and look to support each other. It’s been instrumental for us. I think people are interested in the vision of probation and coming together as a culture.”*

*“It helps you to slow down when you’re presented with immediate risk information. Previously, I’d have someone at my door when they hadn’t really thought through the issue. This approach helps with confidence because they come to me with a structure and we work it through together.”*

The human factors approach adopted in Wales is still relatively new, but we were impressed by the positive views of staff. By implementing a structure that essentially plans for crisis and consultation, anxiety levels in teams have reduced and a more considered approach to decision-making has been enabled.

### **3.2 Management oversight in court teams**

Court teams do not manage cases, but they are responsible for the initial assessment of individuals and the provision of pre-sentence reports (PSRs) to the courts. This initial assessment of the risk of serious harm is key not only to advise the court in sentencing, but also for the subsequent supervision of the individual by the Probation Service. This assessment must be comprehensive, utilising all relevant information, as it will later inform PP decisions in relation to interventions and public protection, if the Probation Service assumes responsibility for the management of the case.

In the court environment, the Probation Service is delivering a direct service to the courts. As a result, its operation must fit in with the working of the court. This means ensuring that the probation staff are available to provide services at the time requested by the courts. The main activity is the provision of PSRs, which can be delivered either orally or in a written form. The vast majority of reports are now delivered on the day but, where necessary, and normally in very complex or high-risk cases, the court adjourns for a more detailed assessment. Only qualified POs complete reports on cases assessed as high risk of serious harm. PSOs can complete reports on cases assessed as medium risk. The need to respond quickly to court queries or requests, inevitably demands a different management approach to court work and, with it, a different approach to management oversight.

There are no bespoke management oversight policies for court teams. As with sentence management, the CBF, PMF, and RPSS are expected to be applied. The TPM is not directly relevant to the work of court teams as they do not manage cases. Court SPOs and PPs only had a limited awareness of its operation. As with sentence management, we found that the main method of management oversight in courts was regular meetings between SPOs and PPs. The need to have staff in courts throughout the working day made the scheduling of these meetings more difficult. Despite the time pressures, these meetings were generally taking place. However, unlike sentence management, the focus of these meetings was less on immediate case considerations and more on wellbeing and professional development. The probation teams staffing the court are primarily PSOs, and, across the inspected regions, they valued immediate access to SPOs to consult on any court queries or requests to which they were unable to respond. The geographical areas involved, and the fact that one SPO can manage courts across several sites, make this challenging. Despite these pressures and the demands of the court timescales, case discussions were taking place. Where SPOs could not be available in person, Microsoft Teams channels were used effectively. One PSO stated:

*“I find case discussions very helpful with my manager. I find my manager very accessible when I’m having a wobble about risk. I tend to phone him and he’ll ring me back very quickly. It’s good to have oversight on the PSR. It helps confirm you’re thinking along the right lines. Having that professional discussion helps to cement the assessment of that person. Whether we’ve got time to have a conversation is a good question. It depends on how needy the bench or the judge is.”*

The Bendall independent review (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023) highlighted that the risk of serious harm had been wrongly assessed during the preparation of his PSR and this adversely affected the subsequent management of the case. It is therefore important, given the number of medium risk of harm reports delivered on the day, that PSOs can seek guidance on levels of risk of serious harm. We found in the inspected regions that arrangements were in place for PSOs to raise any such concerns with either a PO or an SPO.

As in sentence management teams, SPOs cannot be expected to oversee every case due to the volume of reports. It can, however, be expected that processes are in place to ensure that comprehensive checks are made, and that the assessment of the individual being sentenced is accurate. In response to the Bendall review (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023), probation regions have implemented a policy of gatekeeping all court reports, before they are submitted to court. For all cases assessed as high risk of serious harm, the policy directs that reports are checked by the SPO. Arrangements were in place to do this across the inspected regions.

For medium risk of harm cases, peer-to-peer arrangements were in place. This means that in some teams, PSOs are gatekeeping each other's reports. Additional quality assurance activities have been put in place by regions, and these included random reports being selected for review each month by the quality development teams. Staff shortages in courts clearly influence the consistency of gatekeeping, and this is concerning. In regions experiencing staffing pressures, a high number of sessional report writers are being used. As they are not members of the probation team, the gatekeeping arrangements for their reports are inconsistent. The ever-present tension between report production and the demands of the court timescale is also a factor. In some courts, oral reports constitute a high proportion of probation reports. Inevitably, there are no gatekeeping processes in place for these reports, other than professional discussion. PPs highlighted to us the constant pressure *"to reduce the time between completing the report and sentencing"* and the impact this had on report preparation. One PP expressed this pressure succinctly:

*"...to prepare for an interview, undertake the interview, complete your safeguarding checks, then to do an OASys and write the report in one day is barely achievable. With gatekeeping on top of that – and you're conscious of your colleagues' time – it's almost impossible."*

The implementation of RPSS has included court teams but we found limited evidence of reflective sessions taking place. Across all the inspected regions, PPs who had attended the SEEDS training felt that it was more relevant to sentence management PPs. Most SPOs and PPs saw the value of reflective conversations but they did not believe that the current RPSS framework was relevant to the court environment. This was mainly due to their lack of responsibility for ongoing casework. One initiative that was welcomed in the regions where it had been implemented was early morning check-in meetings. These enable decisions to be made in relation to allocation and covering staff absence. The human factors approach in Wales is still to be rolled out fully to the court teams, but where morning check-in meetings have been established, they are viewed positively.

### **3.3 Countersigning and quality assurance**

#### **Countersigning**

SPO management responsibilities include the countersigning of specific pieces of work completed by PPs in their team. Primarily, this activity focuses on OASys, but also includes parole reports in sentence management and dangerousness assessments in court teams.

The time spent by SPOs in countersigning OASys assessments was identified as excessive in the 2020, SPO review. The authors calculated that it accounted for 32.86 per cent of SPOs' time nationally. In response to the concerns raised by this review, an OASys countersigning framework (HMPPS, 2023) was introduced and adopted following unification in 2021. This framework sought to reduce the burden on SPOs by identifying criteria for which countersigning was not necessary. POs could become approved and not have to submit their OASys assessments for countersigning. This

approval process involved the POs submitting three assessments rated 'Good' against the assessment quality assurance (AQA) tool.<sup>14</sup>

SPOs told us that the introduction of the countersigning framework had had a negligible impact. As most PPs remained unapproved, the SPOs continued to countersign most OASys assessments. Some SPOs were critical of the expectations of the AQA, which, in their view, meant that a PP had to spend a disproportionate amount of time on an OASys assessment to get a good rating. As a result, PPs were not being approved. Comments from SPOs included:

*"The countersigning framework isn't working at all. It's very difficult for PPs to get approved and my countersigning responsibilities have not reduced at all."*

*"We have to countersign so many OASys [assessments], especially now all the civil orders are included. The amount of countersigning is ridiculous and cannot be done properly. The standards in AQA for OASys are unrealistic and it is impossible for PPs to become approved."*

The failure to reduce this burden for SPOs has been recognised. In a review undertaken for the EPSIG,<sup>15</sup> it was identified that the framework has not been implemented consistently and that there remained very high volumes of unapproved PPs who required SPO countersignature on their OASys assessments. Significantly, the review also identified that 79 per cent of the assessments completed by unapproved PPs required countersignature, whether or not they were approved in line with the countersigning framework. This clearly demonstrates the limitations of the framework in reducing the SPO workload.

Ensuring that the assessment of a case is comprehensive at the start of supervision is fundamental to good practice and public protection. In addition, SPOs gain insight on a PP's performance from countersigning their work. However, the current level of countersigning for SPOs is time consuming, and potentially takes them away from other management oversight activities.

OASys assessment countersigning does not automatically consider levels of contact, presenting behaviour, or the implementation of risk management plans. A recommendation from the managerial role review was that the impact of the countersigning framework should be reviewed, and we agree.

## **Quality assurance**

The routine quality assurance of casework is a key management oversight activity. The main tools to undertake this work in the Probation Service are the AQA tool and the regional case assessment tool (RCAT).<sup>16</sup> A court case assessment tool is being developed. The focus of the RCAT is on sentence management and it requires the reviewer to consider the overall quality of supervision. This includes reviewing assessment and planning; risk management activity; and enforcement of the order or licence. The latest version includes a question on the quality of the management oversight of the case. The tool was developed by the OSAG in HMPPS for first-tier assurance and is calculated to take the reviewer one and a half hours to complete.

The focus of RCAT on probation practice is welcome and it was used by all the regions we inspected. In KSS, the RCAT was completed only by QDOs. Feedback was relayed directly to the PP and collated to measure the consistency of performance across the PDUs. In London, SPOs undertook the reviews primarily and they had used the RCAT to undertake a significant benchmarking exercise of 600 cases to establish the level of performance across the region. An RCAT dashboard had been set up and a second benchmarking exercise was planned to take place towards the end of 2023, to measure progress. In the West Midlands, both SPOs and QDOs were responsible for RCAT reviews. Some SPOs were using the content of the reviews as the basis for reflective discussions with PPs.

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<sup>14</sup> The HMPPS assessment quality assurance tool is used to quality assure OASys assessments.

<sup>15</sup> Information provided by the Probation Service.

<sup>16</sup> The HMPPS RCAT is used to quality assure casework.



RCAT learning was viewed positively by SPOs and PPs, but there were concerns about the time commitment and who should be responsible for undertaking the task. SPOs in some regions expressed frustration that it was yet another task allocated to them for completion. SPOs from another region reported that they remained responsible, although the task had supposedly been given to QDOs.

The time commitment for RCAT completion means that only one case per PP is planned to be reviewed each year. This will enable the identification of high-level themes as opposed to highlighting immediate concerns or poor practice. This is the key role of first-tier assurance and the primary responsibility of the SPO. We therefore question whether SPOs should automatically have a role in RCAT completion. Other frontline processes provide more immediate assurance about the management of cases. These include lifer panel reviews and MAPPA level 1 reviews. We were pleased to hear from SPOs that these activities continue to be prioritised.

The quality of OASys assessments is evaluated by completion of the AQA, and this is undertaken by both SPOs and QDOs. The standard set by AQA was questioned by some SPOs, and there were concerns that the expectations were not always relevant to the day-to-day management of the case. Recent independent reviews have demonstrated the importance of completing assessments to a high standard, but AQA reviews have only a very limited role in assuring the immediate supervision of a case.

### **3.4 Conclusions and implications**

The implementation of new management oversight policies has been inconsistent, and one-to-one meetings remain the principal method used by SPOs for overseeing cases. However, this has significant limits both on the number of cases that can be reviewed and the time available for discussion. It also contributes to reactive management oversight in which only those cases raised by PPs are reviewed by SPOs. Given the profile of the probation caseload, this is of some concern.

The OASys assessment countersigning arrangements assure the quality of the assessment at the start of a period of supervision. However, the overall countersigning workload of SPOs takes up too much of their time and is often seen as the assurance of a process, rather than day-to-day decision-making and practice. The introduction of RCAT addresses this concern to some extent and we welcome its focus on implementation and the quality of practice.

In most of the inspected regions, there was little evidence that planned RPSS sessions were taking place. While RPSS are appropriate for professional development and practice improvement, they should not be viewed as a principal method of management oversight or first-tier assurance. Too few cases are reviewed, and the sessions are infrequent.

Court teams work to the timetable of the court, which means that PPs must be able to respond to immediate demands and queries. Overall, this is recognised in the arrangements for management oversight. Given the high number of PSOs working in courts, it is important that SPOs are available to advise staff as needed, on issues such as levels of risk of serious harm and curfew requirements on orders. This can be challenging when an SPO is covering several courts.

We agree with the assertions of both SPOs and PDU heads, that SPOs cannot be expected to micro-manage every case. The complexity of the probation caseload demands that management oversight is organised to respond to crises and changes in risk. In the inspected English regions, we were told that a culture of fear was driving practitioners' requests for management oversight entries. The Probation Service introduced the TPM partly to address this issue, and to promote consistency. The model has some strengths but is inflexible, and the recording mechanism is over-complicated.

The operational structure based on the human factors approach adopted in Wales addresses a number of these concerns. It is viewed positively by operational staff and has resulted in a less frenetic working culture. This provides the foundation for greater staff confidence and a less dependent management oversight culture.

## 4 The senior probation officer role and the operational management structure

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In this chapter, we examine the role and responsibilities of the SPO. We consider the professional support that SPOs receive to undertake the role, the structure in which they operate, and their span of activities.

### 4.1 The responsibilities of the SPO

The reviews of the SPO role, referred to earlier in this report, have recognised the pressures that they face and the excessive workloads. The managerial role review highlighted the lack of clarity of the role and the amount of non-operational activity that is undertaken as part of it. Our survey of SPO activity in the regions confirmed this picture. Twenty-nine surveys were completed and identified that SPOs spend significant amounts of time attending to non-operational matters. These include health and safety and building estate issues. In our national survey, over 75 per cent of SPOs had dealt with health and safety issues in the previous month and 62 per cent had dealt with buildings issues. During the inspection, we heard evidence of SPOs dealing with broken toilets, windows, and heating systems. The situation for SPOs working in sentence management teams is particularly acute, and this is recognised by SPOs in other functions.

The responsibility for HR issues was also identified by SPOs as taking up excessive time. In some regions, the management hubs are making a difference and are providing effective administrative support. However, the responsibility for absence management and performance meetings remains with the SPO. These responsibilities for line managers are inevitable, but it must be recognised that these are often complex and challenging issues to address. SPOs welcomed the practical support from the hubs but were critical of the inconsistent professional support they received from the HR services. This comment from an SPO encapsulated the general view:

*“The span of responsibility for SPOs is too broad and help from HR is very poor and inconsistent. HR has no responsibility and merely ‘signposts’ to policies. You need an HR team who actually ‘do’ sickness- and salary-related processes, for example.”*

While the span of responsibility has been acknowledged, the focus for reducing the SPO workload has been on the span of control. Regions have responded by trying to ensure that spans of control do not exceed the designated 1:10 for sentence management SPOs and 1:12 for court SPOs. The West Midlands and KSS region have focused particularly on this, with some success. However, this is for FTE posts and not staff numbers, and we met SPOs responsible for up to 15 PPs in their teams. We also met SPOs managing the designated number of PPs and struggling with their workload. Comments from SPOs included:

*“The emotional load of SPOs in sentence management is enormous – people have to escape because of the emotional load. It impacts on your health and family life ... You have to work extra hours almost every day. It is far too much and simply not sustainable. Countersigning is extensive; we have to countersign home visits, management oversight is now frontline practice – SPOs have to make and countersign all decisions. The management oversight policies put huge pressure on you and it means that SPOs are essentially responsible for all cases. You cannot escape it...”*

*“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 issues, repetition of tasks, HR, building issues, staff stress and burnout, and seeing angry people on probation. It is almost impossible if you are a frontline SPO. Why we are trying to do RCAT and RPSS when we are under so much pressure is beyond me.”*

The span of control contributes to the pressures on SPOs' workload, but it is the span of responsibilities that is central to understanding this workload. Support from the management hubs

and business managers is available but responsibility remains with the SPO. This prevents them from focusing on their operational priorities, including the management oversight of cases. Very few SPOs we met in the English regions felt that they had any control over the recurring and immediate demands of their workload. As well as the personal stress, this helps drive both the frenetic culture and reactive decision-making. There was a more positive picture in Wales, with SPOs stating that the new working structure had improved their ability to manage workload pressures. However, the span of responsibilities remains the same in Wales, and managers expressed concerns that this could potentially undermine the resilience of the human factors approach.

As part of this inspection, we spoke to senior managers from children's social care, mental health, and youth justice. The operational management structure in these services is centred on a team manager. However, the management oversight of cases and provision of reflective supervision are also undertaken by advanced or specialist practitioners in the team. None of the senior managers we met could identify circumstances whereby operational managers would be responsible for dealing with routine buildings issues. Concerns about the pressures on SPOs was identified in the Offender Management in Custody thematic inspection report (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022), which made a recommendation for a senior practitioner role in the Probation Service to provide management oversight and professional support. This recommendation was not accepted by HMPPS. The SPOs' current span of responsibilities continues to be of serious concern. It impedes their ability to provide effective management oversight on a volatile and high-risk caseload.

## 4.2 The operational management structure

The pressures on SPOs and the reactive management oversight culture identified by the inspection are partly the result of the operational management structure. The current structure in sentence management and court teams has two strands, the operational and the administrative. The operational structure centres on SPOs who are responsible for the line management of PPs. On the administrative side, case administrators support the work of PPs and report to senior administration officers (SAOs). SAOs are managed by the PDU business manager. At the head of both strands of the structure is the PDU head.

The primary focus of the SAO role is the team's performance against the national performance framework. They collate the reports provided by performance officers for action to be taken by the SPO, either at an individual or team level. Although the PDU business manager has overall responsibility for buildings and facilities management in a PDU, it falls to SAOs in local teams.

The amount of performance information generated for operational probation teams to respond to is extensive. Some senior managers doubted its impact on improving the delivery of services. Comments included:

*"We spend more time writing about what we're going to do than actually doing it ... I'm interested in what we actually do with the person on probation ... the focus is too much on the recording and not on the doing."*

*"We have created an industry around performance."*

The success of the management arrangements across the regions varied. SAOs in some regions covered several offices, which restricted their ability to deal with buildings and facilities management problems. The high vacancy rates in some regions affected the contribution of administrative staff.

Some SPOs, particularly in sentence management teams, believed that they were responsible for all areas of service delivery. This culture of 'SPO responsibility for everything' was described as an 'embedded cultural belief' in the managerial role review. However, it is also a reality of the organisational structure. Support roles in relation to performance and HR are in place, but the responsibility for decision-making and action sits with the SPO. Similarly, although buildings and facilities management are not their responsibility, they frequently become so because SPOs are the only managers on site. These responsibilities include the communication and implementation of new

operational policies, which can add to the SPO workload. The home visit risk assessment was highlighted by SPOs as an example during the inspection. One SPO stated:

*“The new home visit assessment is a process for the sake of it – I have no time to check the assessments and they are very time consuming. I am the only person in the office who can do it, apparently – it takes 27 clicks of the mouse to upload a home visit risk assessment. I spend enormous amounts of time signing these off...”*

The introduction of new policies is central to organisational learning and development, but in the probation management structure only the SPO has the authority to communicate and implement them at team level. This lack of managerial support undermines the SPO’s ability to focus on management oversight and operational delivery.

The lack of support for SPOs has been recognised nationally, and resources have been allocated for the provision of case administration officers to support them. SPOs were positive about this development, and we heard evidence that this is helping SPOs manage their workload. However, this does not reduce the breadth of immediate responsibility, which restricts the SPO’s ability to deliver effective management oversight.

The SPOs’ immediate responsibilities include quality assurance, and they are supported in this work by QDOs. In the English regions, QDOs sit in a separate team outside the PDU structure. In Wales, they are line managed in the PDU. The work undertaken by QDOs varies across the regions, but they all undertake RCAT and AQA quality assurance. Their responsibilities can also include working directly with PPs to improve practice. The RPSS guidance on EQUIP (Excellence and Quality in Process)<sup>17</sup> states that QDOs can support SPOs by undertaking practice observations, but we found no evidence of this happening. The ability of QDOs to support teams has been limited by the large number of vacancies and the prioritisation, in some regions, of recruiting operational PPs.

In our national survey, sentence management SPOs were critical of the contribution that QDOs make to operational services. Only 21 per cent believed that the role enhanced and supported the management of high risk of serious harm cases. We also found SPOs to be critical of the QDO role during the inspection. The value of quality assurance was recognised, but there was a view that QDOs should also be responsible for providing feedback and the professional development of PPs. One SPO commented:

*“You could argue SPOs need to be on top of cases but we’re managing too much. When actions come back to us from RCATs, it’s time demanding. QDO support is not widely available. It falls to us to develop staff.”*

SPOs were most positive about the contribution of QDOs where they were able to engage directly with them to support the work of their teams. This was particularly evident in Wales. The management of QDOs directly in PDUs ensures that they are not semi-detached from operational work, and this enables them to make a more flexible contribution to operational delivery.

### **4.3 Induction, training, and professional development**

In the absence of a nationally agreed induction package, probation regions have developed their own programmes for those promoted to the role. These programmes were viewed positively by SPOs. In KSS, a rolling programme was operated, improving its accessibility. SPOs were also positive about their own line management. They reported regular meetings with their managers, and generally felt that the latter understood the challenges and had genuine concern for their wellbeing. However, the pressures of the job meant that these meetings were more focused on performance issues rather than professional development. Senior managers in the regions recognised the pressures on their SPOs, and quarterly protected learning and staff development

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<sup>17</sup> EQUIP is the online Probation Service website that provides guidance on all operational processes. The guidance was found in the guidance document: *Managing the Touch Points Model and Reflective Practice Supervision Standards*.

days have been introduced in response. These are used to consider specific areas of management practice, such as professional curiosity.

### Good practice example: Kent, Surrey, and Sussex

KSS has developed an SPO induction programme which runs over six sessions. It operates as a rolling programme, to engage as many SPOs as possible. The six sessions cover the following key areas:

- effective leadership
- HR processes and policies
- equality and diversity
- reflective supervision
- public protection – responsibilities as a manager
- quality and performance – management information.

SPOs who had attended the programme were positive about its content and delivery. The areas covered were viewed as relevant and the workshops provided a supportive environment to learn and develop as a new SPO.

At the time of the inspection, the SPO job description was under review. The PWP is leading this work but core competencies for the role have yet to be established. A consultation exercise with SPOs, to consider their learning needs, was scheduled to take place in autumn 2023, with the establishment of core competencies developed following this process.

The current national model has a designated probation design faculty to develop relevant learning and development, based on commissions from the organisation. This was introduced in 2021. Decisions regarding the prioritisation of learning are made against the learning priorities agreed by the regional probation directors. The recent focus has been on practitioner, rather than managerial, learning. Work is also in progress to review and amend the learning and development offer for SPOs which is being developed by the MoJ learning, talent, and capability team.

SPOs also have access to the online HMPPS 'people manager handbook', which was introduced in August 2023. This includes a guide to how the overall supervision framework operates. It covers all aspects of the managerial role in HMPPS and has specific sections for probation managers. HMPPS also updated its required online learning for SPOs in September 2023. The number of packages is now extensive and includes operational processes and risk assessment. However, there is no specific input on management oversight responsibilities outside of countersigning. The HMPPS first-line managers programme is also available to SPOs.

In our national survey, only 24 per cent of SPOs were happy with their training for the role. This dissatisfaction was also widely present in the inspected regions. SPOs stated that there were long waiting lists for the first-line managers' training and there was limited designated time to undertake it. Most SPOs were critical of the online training available. In their view, it provided inadequate preparation for the step up to the SPO role. SPOs said that they had received minimal or no training on self-management, diversity, or interpersonal skills, which are fundamental to supervising staff and leading teams.

The national model for learning and development was introduced to ensure consistency in both the development and quality of training across the Probation Service. This model provided some additional funding to regions for learning and development. The regional learning and development leads report to the national head of probation learning and not to the region. Some regional managers believe that these arrangements hinder staff development. One senior manager said:

*"To have a staff of over 1,200 with no training department is a huge gap in the organisational structure."*

The aim to deliver consistent training across the Probation Service is understandable. However, the national training and induction arrangements for SPOs do not provide the comprehensive training and support that SPOs require, for the complexity of their role. The probation regions are doing their best to fill this gap, but many SPOs have not received training and for others there have been long delays. Far too many SPOs told us that they had left their job as a PP on the Friday and started work as an SPO the following Monday, with no preparation. In view of the responsibilities that they carry, this is unsatisfactory.

#### **4.4 Conclusions and implications**

There is no national induction and development programme for the SPO role, although online training and a people manager handbook is available. This is recognised as insufficient preparation for the role, and training modules are being developed. The probation regions have developed their own induction and training programmes, but these do not replace the need for a comprehensive national package. This significant gap in the provision of professional support and development for SPOs has a direct impact on confidence levels and their ability to deliver management oversight.

The support provided to SPOs in the current operational management structure is insufficient. The implementation of management hubs has helped with HR processes but the HR advice and support available are inconsistent. SPOs are too often dealing with non-operational responsibilities such as buildings and facilities management. The focus of their role should be on case management and operational matters. The QDO role provides limited operational support to SPOs and the situation has been exacerbated in some regions by the high number of vacancies. However, the focus of the role is on AQA and RCAT completion. This role should be more aligned to operational delivery and, in our view, should sit within the PDU operational structure.

The SPOs' span of responsibility is too wide, and this prevents them from focusing on the role's priority, operational delivery. This includes ensuring that there is effective management oversight of the probation caseload. This, in our view, constitutes a significant organisational risk.

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## Annexe 1: Glossary

<b>AQA</b>	Assessment quality assurance
<b>CBF</b>	Competency-based pay progression framework
<b>EPSIG</b>	Effective practice and service improvement group
<b>EQuiP</b>	Excellence and Quality in Process. This is a Probation Service intranet site that sets out operational practice requirements
<b>HMPPS</b>	HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS): the single agency responsible for both prisons and probation services.
<b>MAPPA</b>	Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements: where probation, police, prison, and other agencies work together locally to manage offenders who pose a higher risk of harm to others. Level 1 is ordinary agency management, where the risks posed by the offender can be managed by the agency responsible for the supervision or case management of the offender. This compares with levels 2 and 3, which require active multi-agency management
<b>MoJ</b>	Ministry of Justice
<b>nDelius</b>	National Delius: the approved case management system used by the Probation Service
<b>OASys</b>	Offender assessment system. Currently used in England & Wales by the probation service to measure the risks and needs of offenders under supervision
<b>Offence sexual predictor (OSP)</b>	OSP is a predictor of sexual offending based upon static risks, age, gender, and criminal history
<b>OSAG</b>	Operational and system assurance group
<b>PMF</b>	Performance management framework
<b>PO</b>	Probation officer: this is the term for a 'qualified' responsible officer who has undertaken a higher education-based course either for 15 or 21 months depending on their degree status. The name of the qualification and content of the training varies depending on when it was undertaken. They manage more complex cases
<b>PSO</b>	Probation services officer: this is the term for a responsible officer who was originally recruited with no qualification. They may access locally determined training to 'qualify' as a probation services officer or to build on this to qualify as a probation officer. They may manage all but the most complex cases depending on their level of training and experience. Some PSOs work within the court setting, where their duties include the writing of pre-sentence reports
<b>PP</b>	Probation practitioner: this is a term used to apply to both probation officers and probation services officers



<b>PQiP</b>	Professional Qualification in Probation
<b>PSR</b>	Pre-sentence report. This refers to any report prepared for a court, whether delivered orally or in a written format
<b>PWP</b>	Probation workforce programme
<b>QDO</b>	Quality development officer
<b>RCAT</b>	Regional case assessment tool
<b>RPSS</b>	Reflective practice supervision standards. These are planned sessions focused on in-depth discussion of a case. Probation practitioners are expected to attend four sessions each year
<b>SAO</b>	Senior administration officer
<b>SEEDS</b>	Skills for effective engagement, development, and supervision. This is the training that both managers and practitioners undertake in preparation for reflective practice sessions
<b>SFO</b>	Serious Further Offence. These are serious offences committed by people being managed by the Probation Service and are then subject to an internal review
<b>TPM</b>	The touch points model: this sets a minimum level of management oversight on cases

## Annexe 2: Methodology

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The inspection sought to answer the following questions:

### **Do the policies, strategy, and arrangements for management oversight enable the delivery of an effective service?**

- Do the policies and procedures outline clear roles and responsibilities for managers to enable the delivery of effective management oversight?
- Do managers and staff understand their responsibilities in relation to management oversight?
- Do policies clearly set out arrangements for the quality assurance of cases, management oversight through supervision, and management oversight of the immediate risk?
- Is there clear guidance for the prioritisation of cases for management oversight?

### **Does the operational structure and arrangements for management oversight enable the delivery of an effective service?**

- Do the SPO role and responsibilities enable the delivery of effective management oversight?
- Do the roles and responsibilities of non-operational staff support the delivery of effective management oversight?
- Are the views of managers and staff sought and used to develop effective management oversight practice?

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

- Does management oversight enhance and sustain a high quality of work with people on probation?
- Is the appraisal process used effectively to ensure that staff are delivering a high-quality service?
- Are the management oversight arrangements for PQiPs effective?
- Does management oversight support a culture of learning and continuous improvement?
- Do the arrangements for management oversight support staff wellbeing?
- Do the arrangements for management oversight support the resilience and confidence of staff?

### **Do the skills of managers support the provision of effective management oversight?**

- Do recruitment processes provide a sufficient assessment of all skills necessary for the role?
- Is an effective induction programme delivered to new managers that addresses issues of diversity and is accessible to all?
- Do the training and support for management oversight meet the diverse needs of the staff and caseload?
- Do the training and support for management oversight meet the needs of managing the risk of serious harm in cases?
- Do the arrangements for management oversight enable staff to learn, develop, and apply skills which will improve the quality of work with service users?
- Are managers equipped to identify and meet the learning needs of staff?

- Are managers sufficiently equipped to carry out the role with access to appropriate training to cover all aspects?
- Is there effective oversight of SPO work?

### **Does management oversight enable the effective management of the risk of serious harm?**

- Are the level and nature of management oversight sufficient to manage and minimise the risk of harm?
- Are the level and nature of management oversight sufficient to enable effective decision-making?
- Do the policies and arrangements for management oversight ensure the proactive oversight of cases where the risk of serious harm is present?

### **Do the policies and arrangements for management oversight help drive improvements in multi-agency working?**

- Does learning from partner agencies inform management oversight practice?
- Do probation managers have sufficient understanding of multi-agency work to provide effective management oversight?
- Does the SPO role in multi-agency work drive effective practice?

### **Data from the current core adult inspection programme**

In the core adult inspection programme 2021–2023, judgements were made on the effectiveness of management oversight. This information was collated to provide a national picture of the effectiveness of management oversight. It was also analysed to identify any trends in relation to sufficiency ratings and spans of control, SPO vacancy rates, and the risk of serious harm.

### **National survey**

Prior to the fieldwork weeks, a national survey was circulated to all SPOs. The questions covered the key areas of operational delivery, management oversight policy, and their experience of the role.

There were 1,435 full-time equivalent SPOs working for the Probation Service on 31 March 2023. We received 392 responses, a response level of 27 per cent. This equates to a margin of error of  $\pm 4$  per cent at the 95 per cent confidence level; thus, for example, if 50 per cent of the respondents answer a question in particular way, the true figure for all SPOs is very likely to be between 46 and 54 per cent. That is a reasonable basis upon which to draw firm conclusions.

Of the 392 respondents, 85 per cent worked full-time hours and 95 per cent had worked in probation services for over five years. Seventy-seven per cent were women, and 78 per cent were aged over 40 years. Ninety-two per cent of those who answered the question were white; this was 76 per cent of the whole sample.

### **Regional fieldwork**

We undertook fieldwork in five probation regions. The following focus groups were undertaken:

- heads of operations
- PDU heads
- sentence management SPOs
- court SPOs
- PQiP SPOs

- quality development team managers
- probation practitioners court
- Probation practitioners sentence management
- PQiPs
- Business managers and senior administrators
- Operational managers from other functions to include unpaid work, approved premises, and programmes
- SPO activity

### **SPO regional survey**

In the inspected regions, we asked sentence management and court SPOs to record their activity over a period of four weeks in relation to: time spent providing planned and unplanned management oversight; time spent on HR matters; time spent at internal and external meetings; and tasks in relation to non-operational issues, such as buildings and facilities management. Twenty-nine surveys were returned from the regions and analysed.

### **National fieldwork**

A national fieldwork week was completed. This included meetings with:

- probation work programme team
- HMPPS human factors team
- the effective practice and service improvement group (EPSIG)
- HMPPS sentence management lead
- the chief probation officer
- SFO national team
- HMPPS workforce capability team
- National Association of Probation Officers
- Senior representatives from external agencies – adult mental health, children’s social care, and youth justice