



HM Inspectorate
of Probation

An inspection of probation services in:

Essex North PDU

The Probation Service – East of England region

HM Inspectorate of Probation, August 2024



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The role of HM Inspectorate of Probation

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We inspect these services and publish inspection reports. We highlight good and poor practice, and use our data and information to encourage high-quality services. We are independent of government, and speak independently.

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Foreword

Essex North Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) was last inspected by HM Inspectorate of Probation in 2022 when it was rated overall as 'Inadequate'. During this inspection we found considerable efforts made by leaders to address the issues about which we raised concern at our last inspection and although further attention is still required, those efforts are recognised in our overall rating of 'Requires improvement'.

Leaders within the PDU were strong and forward-thinking, developing strong relationships with partners to ensure appropriately integrated services were being developed while at the same time introducing a number of innovative approaches to the oversight of the most complex and challenging cases it was managing. Limited resources continued to plague the service, as we reported at the last inspection; in particular, the lack of qualified Probation Officers (POs) undermined much of what it was attempting to achieve, with only 41 per cent of its target number in post at the time of the inspection and with the majority managing excessively high workloads. Leaders understood these risks well and had introduced a number of initiatives to manage as best they could the inevitable challenges this brought. This included the over-recruiting of Probation Services Officers (PSO) and the reorganisation of teams to offer support to POs where possible. With considerable numbers of staff in training it was hoped that improvements would be seen in the forthcoming months.

Despite every effort from leaders, work against our service delivery standards remained, as we found at the last inspection, rated as 'Inadequate'. While we did see much that was positive and many staff working both hard and effectively, sadly this was not consistent. More focus was necessary to convert training and staff development into effective practice and to ensure that management oversight had sufficient impact.

The positive relationships garnered by leaders meant that there was generally reasonable access to services in the community. More needed to be made of these by practitioners in order to offer further support to the management of their cases.

Despite the disappointing overall rating, both staff and leaders should be proud of much that they are doing. The mechanisms, processes, systems and relationships in place across the PDU are the right ones, and it was encouraging to see how motivated and buoyant staff were, despite the pressures many of them were under. With this there remains every reason to believe that, with continued focus on the most significant aspects of work the service undertakes and improvements in staff numbers, progress will also be seen in frontline work.

I wish the PDU and its staff and managers every success in taking this work forward.



Martin Jones CBE
HM Chief Inspector of Probation

Ratings

Essex North PDU

Fieldwork started 13 May 2024

Score **04/21**

Overall rating

Requires improvement



1. Organisational arrangements and activity

P 1.1 Leadership

Good



P 1.2 Staffing

Requires improvement



P 1.3 Services

Requires improvement



2. Service delivery

P 2.1 Assessment

Inadequate



P 2.2 Planning

Inadequate



P 2.3 Implementation and delivery

Inadequate



P 2.4 Reviewing

Inadequate



Recommendations

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

Essex North PDU should:

1. ensure that Essex North PDU has sufficient staffing resources in place to provide a high-quality, personalised and responsive service for all people on probation
2. improve the use of interventions and services to support the desistance and manage the risk of people on probation
3. ensure domestic abuse and safeguarding information is analysed sufficiently to inform the quality of assessment, planning and management of people on probation
4. improve the quality of work undertaken with people on probation who are on post-custody release licence.

Background

We conducted fieldwork in Essex North PDU over the period of two weeks, beginning 13 May 2024. We inspected 42 community orders and 17 releases on licence from custody where sentences and licences had commenced during two separate weeks, between 02 October and 08 October 2023 and 30 October and 05 November 2023. Our case-cohort comprised eight cases assessed as low risk of serious harm, 40 as medium risk of serious harm and 11 as high risk of serious harm. Nine of the cases we inspected were of females. We also conducted 55 interviews with probation practitioners.

Essex North is one of eight PDUs in the East of England region of The Probation Service. The Head of Service had been in post for approximately 14 years and was supported by a Deputy Head of Service who had taken up the role in November 2023.

The PDU was operating in red status under the national Prioritisation Framework (PF) meaning that some activity had been deprioritised. This national guidance is produced by The Probation Service to enable PDUs to manage demand where staff capacity is low. At the point of the inspection being announced, there were 161 staff working in the PDU across all grades, a small increase overall from 12 months earlier. While administrative staff and PSO staffing had improved, this was not the case for POs of whom only 41 per cent of the target number were in post.

The PDU operates from three office locations – Colchester, Harlow and Chelmsford. It serves three courts: Chelmsford Magistrates' Court, Chelmsford Crown Court and Colchester Magistrates' Court. The two primary male prisons the service works with are HM Prisons Chelmsford and Highpoint, and for women, HM Prison Peterborough, although only HMP Chelmsford is based within the PDU. Work is also undertaken, on a national court report writing contract, with the military corrective facility centre in Colchester and interventions are also delivered under contract there too. The total caseload held by the East of England probation service at the time the inspection was announced was 20,398, of which Essex North PDU was responsible for 2,753.

Essex North PDU covers one local authority (Essex County Council) and eight district councils – Harlow, Colchester, Chelmsford, Epping, Maldon, Uttlesford, Tendring and Braintree. It is policed by Essex Police and has mixed urban and rural communities. The ethnic makeup of Essex is predominantly white (90.4 per cent based on the 2021 census), with 9.6 per cent identifying as from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic heritage. Overall, 17 per cent of the services' staff group identified as minority ethnic.

A range of commissioned rehabilitation services (CRS) were delivered across the PDU: Interventions Alliance are responsible for accommodation, the Forward Trust delivered personal wellbeing services and the Advance charity delivered women's services across Essex North. CRS for finance, benefit and debt had been delivered by a grant agreement via Citizens Advice Essex since November 2023. Grant funding also provided a mentoring project specifically for people on probation from an ethnic minority which was delivered by EFL Trust (the English Football League charity). Community accommodation services tier 3 was provided by The Housing Network.

Progress made against previous recommendations can be found at the end of this report.

1. Organisational arrangements and activity

P 1.1. Leadership



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

Good

Leadership within the PDU was strong and clearly focused. Long-term limited resources had inevitably impacted on the quality of work undertaken with people on probation and it was unlikely that PO shortfalls would be resolved in the near future. Nevertheless, significant innovation and effort had gone into managing the resourcing shortfalls and its impact on frontline operations while also focusing on long-term strategic partnerships to move the service forward. It was a testament to senior leaders and staff that the positive culture observed during the inspection had been possible given the pressures on staff. The rating of 'Good' reflects efforts made to build the service and develop structures and systems that gave the service every chance to improve casework in the future.

Strengths:

- The PDU had been, for some time, in the top 10 of under-resourced PDUs across the country. Despite these longstanding and embedded resourcing challenges the senior leadership demonstrated an undaunting and passionate commitment to drive the work of the service forward.
- Governance arrangements were well established and enabled a clear focus on development, driving strategic direction and monitoring progress. It also enabled the development of local initiatives that spoke to local priorities such as the child protection and complex case panels while also supporting wider initiatives such as the Essex Violence and Vulnerability Unit.
- Partnership work, both pan-Essex and within Essex North was a strength. The clear outward-focused approach ensured strong integration with partner agencies, especially Essex Police and Essex County Council, and included forums such as the reducing reoffending, criminal justice, safeguarding children and safeguarding adult boards along with the violence and vulnerability round table and community safety partnerships.
- The planned extension of The Better Outcomes from Linked Data initiative demonstrated a particularly positive initiative, extending the model of information sharing further and in partnership with Essex police and prisons.
- Leaders ensured a supportive yet challenging approach to the development of middle managers to drive progression, build confidence and create a positive culture. This was done primarily through the Quality Matters Board and linked back to performance meetings.
- A clear mechanism for sharing learning from a range of review processes, including Serious Further Offences and child safeguard practice reviews was in place and generally worked well.

- Essex North PDU had been designated as red status in the PF for over two years as a consequence of chronic understaffing. While PSO levels had improved gradually in the 12 months before the inspection, PO levels remained parlous. Staff were well versed in what the impact of this was and what they needed to prioritise. Communication across the PDU was generally well-managed.
- Leaders were acutely aware of the risks for the PDU and had been proactive in attempting to mitigate the worst excesses of understaffing. The planned over-recruitment of PSOs in the previous 12 months enabled the introduction of the caseload management system offering practical support to excessively busy practitioners. Most staff appreciated this approach and felt it offered some helpful support.
- The introduction of the probation operation delivery (POD) model also helped to build confidence in smaller teams and create strong bonds. Both initiatives had helped substantially to build a strong positive culture within the PDU which was apparent throughout the inspection.
- A key focus of leaders had been the improvement of domestic abuse and safeguarding enquiries. Access to both police and children's services systems had been negotiated and were being rolled out across the PDU. An additional, though temporary, business manager had been in post since March 2024 supporting this development and offering additional help to the PDU.
- Monitoring by the PDU of police and safeguarding enquiries between January 2024 and the time of the inspection suggested that they had been undertaken in over 99 per cent of licence and community orders. This period however post-dated the start of orders we looked at and did not take into account follow-up enquiries nor any necessary follow-up activity.
- Work engaging people on probation was excellent. Fifteen mentors were in post with more planned with the introduction of a model specifically focused on integrated offender management (IOM). A wide range of events had been conducted and a number of actions had been implemented in relation to improving service experiences for people on probation, particularly in relation to induction.
- Some important work had been undertaken in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion including a push to improve pre-sentence report (PSR) completion for four specific minority groups at court: women, people under 25, travellers and those with a minority ethnic heritage. Between January 2024 and May 2024 report completion for these four groups had risen from 50 to 80 per cent.

Areas for improvement:

- Despite a clear strategic approach, direction and focus on innovation in partnership, leadership was not, ultimately, enabling the PDU to deliver a consistently high-quality, personalised and responsive service for all people on probation. Casework across all four service delivery standards was rated as 'Inadequate'.
- For many staff the impact of excessive caseloads was impacting on their wellbeing due primarily to excessive workloads. Only 24 out of 50 respondents (48 per cent) to our survey said sufficient attention was paid to their wellbeing.

- Learning across the PDU was still not impacting consistently on the day-to-day work of operational staff. In 83 per cent of cases we inspected, management oversight was judged to be missing, ineffective or insufficient. More was needed to ensure that quality assurance was objective and learning from it was taken forward.
- While the introduction of a resettlement team/POD was likely to be an effective approach in the long run, our analysis found that in key aspects, a significantly lower proportion of licence cases were evaluated as sufficient compared with those on a community order. Leaders need to understand why these differences exist.

P 1.2. Staffing



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

Requires improvement

Essex North PDU had made considerable strides in their local recruitment of both administrative staff and PSOs but continued to struggle with PO recruitment. Only 41 per cent of the planned number of POs were in post. This group of staff had excessively high workloads. A number of workforce initiatives had been put in place in an attempt to alleviate this pressure with some success, but the situation was unsustainable. With a number of newly qualified POs expected to start soon, it was anticipated that staffing pressure would ease somewhat. Training support was reasonable, but more was needed to ensure learning was reflected in practice. Taken as a whole, this has resulted in an overall rating for staff of 'Requires improvement'.

Strengths:

- Staffing across the PDU had improved as a whole over the 12 months prior to the inspection, with the proportion of staff in administrative roles up to 89 per cent of compliment and PSOs over-recruited to 126 per cent (including Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) trainees).
- Increases in PSO numbers were reflected in substantial reductions in sickness and staff retention levels.
- There were high numbers of PQiPs in training; those currently in the three cohorts would be retained within the PDU. It was anticipated that in the next 12 months up to 20 new POs could join the service.
- At the time of the inspection middle managers and administrative staff had reasonable workloads, enabling the former to undertake additional specialist activities and responsibilities beyond their day-to-day functions and without excessive numbers of staff to manage. It was acknowledged however that this could change given the recruitment of new frontline staff and the excessive caseloads some, particularly POs, had.
- There were positive attempts to manage the limited PO staffing and workload pressures although ultimately with limited success. Staff had been encouraged to change office bases, when possible, to meet demand and direction had been used where necessary. Some temporary staff had been utilised and detached duty from a different PDU within the region had also been used.
- Most staff in our survey (39 out of 50 (78 per cent)) believed the PDU promoted a culture of learning and continuous improvements. Mandatory training completion levels were appropriate. Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) told us about useful access, in a number of cases, to new manager training and access to 'buddies' when they started.
- Practitioner dedicated support provision and development days had been rolled out across all three teams which focused on topics identified through the regional case assessment tool learning. A Quality Development Officer

was available subject to demand to offer case consultation and individual advice.

- Overall, the make-up of staff across the PDU exceeded the proportion identifying as being from an ethnic minority compared to the caseload of people on probation or the general population, although this fell when looking at operational staff.

Areas for improvement:

- Staffing had been a perennial issue across Essex North PDU and the wider region and was acknowledged as such in the last inspection of the PDU (2022) as well as that of the Essex Community Rehabilitation Company back in 2018.
- Despite recent improvements in PSO and administrative staffing levels, staffing across Essex North PDU remained insufficient. At the time of the inspection only 41 per cent of POs were in post. For this group of staff, average working days lost per year was 15 days compared with 13 days 12 months prior to the inspection announcement, and less than 10 days on average across the PDU. Attrition rates were over 10 per cent.
- Only six staff completing our survey said they believed staffing levels were sufficient, of which none were POs.
- Around half of those in our survey and in case interviews said they felt their workloads were manageable, but for operational staff this was mostly PSOs or POs with protected caseloads. Workloads for operational staff were higher than any of the other PDUs across the East of England region, the average for a PO was 158 per cent and for a PSO 110 per cent. Such levels are unsustainable.
- Where staffing levels were worst, and workload highest, this impacted negatively on the quality of casework.
- Despite most staff in our survey (78 per cent), including all POs, saying they received regular supervision, its effectiveness in enhancing the quality of work, and in particular for operational staff, remained in question.

P 1.3. Services



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

Requires improvement

There was a reasonable range of services available, through both CRS and wider community provision. The number of referrals to CRS over the last 12 months had been, generally, above the anticipated level, but more could have been made of these resources. Strategic work with partner agencies was generally well-managed and effective. More needed to be done to manage multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) boards' level 1 cases, and we found that work with individuals on licence required closer attention. This has resulted in an overall rating for services of 'Requires improvement'.

Strengths:

- Overall, the range of services available for people on probation was reasonable and reflected the PDU's comprehensive needs analysis based on OASys. Much of the provision reflected the PDU's strong emphasis on work with partners.
- The range of CRS provision was also broadly appropriate, and levels of referrals generally exceeded anticipated demand. Access to a range of other provision was positive including alcohol and substance misuse services.
- The personal wellbeing service provided by the Forward Trust was particularly effective and widely accessed with notably high levels of completions for people on probation. Alongside individual support, a number of group projects were in place, including drop-in services with coffee mornings as well as music and gardening projects. It was also a strong example of integrated provision drawing on support from peer mentors.
- A number of positive local and regional initiatives had also been commissioned including heavy goods vehicle driver training and, in conjunction with Essex County Council, dependency and recovery workers across each of the main sites.
- Provision for women was evolving well. Given staffing levels, some elements had been delayed but the service was picking up, including the introduction of women concentrators at each of the three offices. Women's reporting centres were also available at Chelmsford, Clacton and Harlow and a new initiative was being developed of a dedicated women's IOM cohort. We found that work with women in relation to the implementation and delivery of services was significantly more effective than with men.
- Despite some frustration experienced by staff with the CRS accommodation provision, there were established links with the community accommodation scheme (CAS3) service as well as with other providers, including the 'accommodation for ex-offenders' scheme in Chelmsford.
- Some initial work relating to disproportionality had been undertaken. Anglia Ruskin university had undertaken some research, commissioned by the Essex

criminal justice board, into the extent of ethnic minority disproportionality in the criminal justice system, to which the probation service had provided some data specifically in relation to pre-sentence reports. The Head of Service was a member of the relatively recently created Race Disparity Action group which had been formed in response to this research. Some initial work included the redacted comparison of Crown Prosecution Service papers relating to knife crime to compare language used in relation to the ethnicity of individuals.

- Reasonable completion rates had been achieved in relation to diversity information for people on probation but further work on evaluating disproportionality was dependent upon the development of a regionally agreed monitoring tool.
- Effective arrangements for liaison and joint working were in place in relation to MAPPA boards. Included was work with the domestic abuse problem solving and management of sexual offenders and violent offenders teams reinforcing further the value placed on joint work across agencies. Arrangements for managing MAPPA level 2 and 3 cases were reasonable as were consultation arrangements in considering whether the threshold for inclusion of cases reached the required threshold.
- IOM was well embedded in each of the three teams across the PDU. We found a number of examples within our service delivery cohort of effective joint working, liaison and support.
- There were positive relationships with sentencers which included regular liaison meetings and face-to-face communication along with newsletters. Essex North PDU had the highest sentencer satisfaction levels across the East of England region (86 per cent) and sentencers spoken to during the inspection were positive about their experience and valued the input of probation to advise on sentencing options.
- There were high levels of demand for Community Sentence Treatment Requirements, and in particular Mental Health Treatment Requirements (MHTR) managed through St Andrews Healthcare. Although funding had been increased for MHTRs, the combination of increased funding and effective court liaison had increased the level of demand to the point whereby waiting times were up to seven months. Waiting lists were being managed expeditiously however and we were told that individuals were able to be seen much quicker where need was greatest.

Areas for improvement:

- Despite effective MAPPA arrangements, more work was required in relation to level one cases. Work was being progressed and was a priority set by senior leaders, but at the time of the inspection it was estimated that around 200 cases still required reviewing, potentially impacting on the effective management of risk.
- Whilst a range of services were available, our review of cases determined a rating of 'Inadequate' for the delivery and implementation of work with people on probation. It was disappointing that, given the red status of the PDU in relation to the PF, more use was not made of external services.
- In our service delivery case cohort, in only 46 per cent of cases was it determined that the delivery of services built upon the individual's strengths and enhanced protective factors.

- Overall, in too many of the cases we reviewed, work to address desistance and reoffending was insufficient.
- Although the implementation of the Short-term Sentence team/POD had the potential to be effective by developing close links with prisons and service providers to enhance the transition from custody, greater analysis was needed of why this was not having the consistent impact expected.

Feedback from people on probation

User Voice, working with HM Inspectorate of Probation, had contact with 78 people on probation as part of this inspection. This was made up of 63 face-to-face surveys and 12 online surveys. Three further in-depth interviews were also undertaken but while these contributions were included in the overall evaluation, the participants did not complete a survey. Eighty-nine per cent of participants were male and 11 per cent female, with 40 per cent on a prison licence and 59 per cent on a community order; one per cent said they were unsure. There was an overrepresentation of those individuals from an ethnically diverse background – 25 per cent compared to only five per cent in the services' caseload.

- Everyone who was surveyed said they had an induction, although of those who knew they had a sentence plan, only 32 per cent (22 out of 68) said they had been involved in the creation of it with their practitioner. Over 80 per cent of respondents said they understood what was expected of them while being supervised and felt the practitioner had taken time to understand them.
- Although 53 per cent (40/75) of survey participants stated that their appointments were useful in helping them in their rehabilitation:

“Thanks to my probation officer I now have a roof over my head and that has helped everything fall into place. It has helped me stay sober and it has helped me to get a small part-time job, which my Probation Officer helped me get by helping me with interview techniques and stuff.”

- Twenty-three out of 75 respondents did not agree, with a number suggesting contact was just a brief check-in:

“Don't really help just going to appointments and hearing the same thing every time. How am I doing, what I've been up to?”

- The majority of those surveyed said their appointments were within a reasonable distance for them to travel, that they could have an appointment at a time that suited them and that they felt safe accessing the office.
- Of those people on probation who stated they needed access to services, 81 per cent stated that probation had helped them access services relevant to their personal needs, strengths and circumstances. Overall, 83 per cent of survey participants stated that they felt they were treated fairly by probation staff and 65 per cent said they felt supported.

“I am now mentally more stable, I have access to my daughter, I'm sober and I have a fresh start.”

Diversity and inclusion

Strengths:

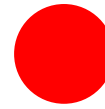
- As with all PDUs in the East of England region, Essex North had its own Equality and Diversity Delivery Plan which dovetailed to the regional model. Some positive initiatives had been undertaken specifically to impact on service delivery. Included in this had been the push to improve the completion of PSRs for four target groups: minority ethnic people, those under 25, travellers and women. Completion rates had increased between January 2024 and May 2024 from 50 to 80 per cent.
- At the time of the inspection announcement, 17 per cent of the overall staff group identified as being from an ethnic minority compared with only five per cent of the current caseload for the PDU and 9.6 per cent of the general population (census data 2021). Although this fell for operational staff, it still reflected both the general population of the PDU's area and the current caseload.
- Some early work had been undertaken in analysing disproportionality. The Head of Service was a member of the 'Race Disparity Action Team' approved through the Essex Criminal Justice Board. Some initial work of the group had included the redacted comparison of a range of PSRs for analysis.
- Work with women was improving and had made significant positive steps in the months before the inspection. The women's concentrator model was being launched and reporting sites were available across all three main sites within the PDU. The development of the women's IOM cohort was also a positive initiative.
- The PDU-based health and justice lead had secured funding for various support aids, including those for neurodiversity and dyslexia.
- Via the engaging people on probation group, reverse monitoring had been introduced across the East of England region, with one individual from Essex North. Under this model, mentoring is offered from the minority ethnic people on probation community to senior people in HM Prison and Probation Service. The model was developed via the national Race Action Team and has been delivered as a pilot. It is likely to be rolled out wider and be extended.

Areas for improvement:

- Further work was needed to fully understand disproportionality across different groups of people on probation within the PDU, but this was being developed at a regional level and was dependent on the adoption of an agreed equality monitoring tool.
- Although in the vast majority of the cases we reviewed information relating to the person on probation's protected characteristics was clearly recorded, in only a little over half of the cases did the practitioners take such issues into account when undertaking their assessment.

2. Service delivery

P 2.1. Assessment



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

Inadequate

Our rating¹ for assessment is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions and is driven by the lowest score:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does assessment focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	49%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on the factors linked to offending and desistance?	66%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	34%

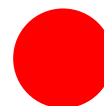
- Although practitioners considered, in a reasonable majority of cases, how the individual circumstances of people on probation would impact on their ability to comply and engage with service delivery, protected characteristics were considered in just over half of cases (54 per cent). This was disappointing given that diversity was available on file in the vast majority of cases we reviewed. As a consequence, in fewer than half of cases it was determined that assessment focused sufficiently on engaging people on probation.
- In a reasonable majority of cases we saw a sufficient focus on factors linked to offending behaviour and desistance. However, in too many cases information across different strands were not sufficiently analysed nor linked together to ensure an overarching assessment of risk.
- Work relating to keeping other people safe and public protection was a particular concern. Although in only four cases was a response not received following a request to the police for domestic abuse information to inform assessment, it was not requested in 19 per cent of cases. Similarly, in only three cases was information about child safeguarding or child protection requested and not received back, but in 12 cases this information was not requested.
- It was reassuring that the PDU had, by the time of the inspection, direct access to both police and children's services databases (although practitioner recruitment for the latter had yet to be completed), and consequently might reasonably expect this figure to improve, although this would not improve

¹ The rating for the standard is driven by the score for the key question, which is placed in a rating band. [Full data and further information about inspection methodology is available in the data workbook for this inspection on our website.](#)

performance if practitioners did not make necessary enquiries in the first place. Nevertheless, the services' own monitoring between January and May 2024 (after the cases we reviewed had been assessed) suggested that over 99 per cent of cases had police and safeguarding enquiries undertaken.

- Enquiries were only one part of the overall assessment of risk. In 19 out of 47 cases where domestic abuse was a relevant factor and 28 out of 49 cases where child protection or child safeguarding was required to be used in the assessment, insufficient or no information was obtained. In too many cases practitioners appeared to see the obtaining of safeguarding and domestic abuse information as the objective; rather than using it while undertaking an assessment of the person's risk, or potential risk. We saw numerous examples of information, for instance, being obtained that said the person being assessed was known to children's services but with little detail as to what that was. Often, no further enquiry was undertaken to obtain clarification.
- Information about risk was also often available from other sources such as previous reports, previous convictions and other agencies, including service providers. Overall, in only 21 out of 59 cases did we determine that the assessment had drawn sufficiently on available sources of information.

P 2.2. Planning



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

Inadequate

Our rating² for planning is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions and is driven by the lowest score:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does planning focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	46%
Does planning focus sufficiently on reducing reoffending and supporting desistance?	59%
Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	49%

- Although in 36 out of the 59 cases we looked at whether planning set a level pattern and type of contact sufficient to engage the individual and to support the effectiveness of specific interventions, it was disappointing that in only 25 of those cases was the person on probation involved meaningfully in planning and their views taken into account. This correlated with what our User Voice survey found. It was encouraging to note however that this was an area that the engaging people on probation work in the PDU had identified and was actively working to address.
- We saw a number of examples of clear planning, engaging with the person on probation and identifying how work detailed in assessments would translate into subsequent work. Frustratingly, we also came across a number of cases where some elements of identified work to address risk and to address desistance had been included in plans, but others had not. This usually undermined the overall plan.
- Limitations in assessment of risk usually translated into poor overall risk management plans. Disappointingly, we also reviewed a number of cases where work had been appropriately identified with partner agencies, but no indication was given of how work would be demarcated, implemented or monitored.

² The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table. [Full data and further information about inspection methodology is available in the data workbook for this inspection on our website.](#)

P 2.3. Implementation and delivery



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

Inadequate

Our rating³ for implementation and delivery is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions and is driven by the lowest score:

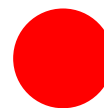
Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Is the sentence or post-custody period implemented effectively with a focus on engaging the person on probation?	47%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support desistance?	36%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?	31%

- It was encouraging that in three-quarters of the cases we examined sufficient efforts were made to enable the person on probation to complete their sentence, offering flexibility and taking their personal circumstances into account.
- Despite such support, the level and nature of contact offered to individuals was too often unsatisfactory. In only 22 out of 49 cases, other than when non-compliance had been a factor, was contact sufficient to reduce reoffending and support desistance. To some degree this was not surprising given the service was operating under red within the PF; however, with limited staff in post, it might be reasonable to expect that there would be an increase in the use of external services to provide necessary levels of support and engagement, yet in 21 out of 46 relevant cases this was not the case.
- For a significantly higher proportion of women than men the implementation and delivery of services supported desistance effectively. Women were significantly more likely than men to receive sufficient levels of contact, and in two-thirds of female cases local services were engaged to support and sustain desistance; again significantly more than with men.
- Under the PF, greater focus should be given to higher-risk cases, yet contact was sufficient to manage and minimise the risk of harm in only 22 out of 56 applicable cases. We found that very similar proportions of cases were deemed to have had sufficient contact to address either desistance or risk regardless of their assessed risk of serious harm.

³ The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table. [Full data and further information about inspection methodology is available in the data workbook for this inspection on our website.](#)

- Although in 31 out of 47 interviews as part of our case review, where work to address risk was relevant, staff said there were effective working relationships with other agencies to manage the risk of harm to others, but we found that this was less often the case. In only seven out of 36 relevant cases did we assess that there was effective multi-agency working in respect of safeguarding children and in only 10 out of 22 relevant cases were there effective arrangements to manage domestic abuse. In too many cases there was a lack of professional curiosity or, as we saw in some cases, aspects of the case had been managed reasonably well but others had been missed or insufficiently considered. Updated police or children's services enquiries were not always made and, in some cases, not subsequently followed up.

P 2.4. Reviewing



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

Inadequate

Our rating⁴ for reviewing is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions and is driven by the lowest score:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting the compliance and engagement of the person on probation?	47%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting desistance?	37%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	32%

- In the better cases we saw, individuals were engaged in the process of reviewing their progress, whether formally or informally, considering the impact that their engagement had on aspects of their life and what the next steps would be. This considered work to address desistance and risks of harm. Where appropriate, discussions were had with other agencies involved in the management of risk or the delivery of associated services such as drug treatment or CRS. We saw a number of examples of good and effective reviews.
- In too many cases however, as we found in planning, the person on probation was not involved in the reviewing process. In only 22 out of 59 cases were they deemed to have been sufficiently involved.
- Similarly, in too few cases did reviewing focus sufficiently on either desistance or risk management work. In only 12 of 47 relevant cases was reviewing informed by other agencies working with the person on probation and in only 14 of 53 applicable cases was there necessary input from other agencies involved in managing the person's risk of harm.
- As we saw in other aspects of casework, in a number of examples practitioners reviewed some of the key elements of work, but not others, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of the reviewing process.
- Overall, work undertaken with people on community orders was better than that with those on prison licence. In many key aspects a significantly higher proportion of cases were assessed as sufficiently meeting our standards and key questions than was the case with those cases on licence. This was the case across all three key questions in reviewing.

⁴ The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table.

Outcomes

Strengths:

- The accommodation status of people on probation had remained steady since the start of licences or orders, with over 70 per cent of individuals in settled accommodation. No one at the time of the inspection was classified as homeless.
- Levels of compliance were generally reasonable.
- Although 10 people on probation were not available for work at the time of our inspection, this was unchanged since the commencement of licences or orders and there had been a very slight reduction in the number of people classified as unemployed. The number of people in full- or part-time employment or training had also remained consistent during this time.

Areas for improvement:

- Overall, in only 13 cases we reviewed had there been sufficient improvements in factors most closely linked to offending and in only 10 cases were these identified as related to risk of harm.

Progress on previous recommendations

Previous recommendation	Action taken and impact	Categorisation	Improvement still required?
From previous Probation Service inspection of Essex North (fieldwork w/c 21 March 2022. – published 17 May 2022).	Briefly describe action taken and impact	Sufficient progress/some progress/no progress	Yes/no If yes, consider repeating the recommendation
Ensure priorities are clearly communicated and understood by probation practitioners and middle managers	The PDU had published a single page outlining its priorities for staff in light of its red status under the PF. This appeared well known by staff. Communication was generally good. Despite this we saw little difference in the level, quality or effectiveness of provision across the range of cases we reviewed. In some aspects people on probation assessed as low risk were better managed.	Some progress	Yes
Ensure all new SPOs receive the appropriate support and training to enable them to manage their teams and caseloads effectively	Although many SPOs spoken to spoke positively about the regionally designed 'new managers programme' and wider support from senior leaders, this was not consistently impacting on the work undertaken, especially in relation to management oversight. In only eight out of 57 relevant cases was management oversight assessed as sufficient.	Some progress	Yes

<p>Ensure pre-sentence domestic abuse and safeguarding checks are completed and utilised to inform assessment, planning and risk management</p>	<p>Despite PDU monitoring that suggested over 99 per cent of cases commencing in the five months before the inspection had police and safeguarding enquiries completed this did not concur with our findings. In 30 per cent of pre-sentence cases domestic abuse enquiries were either requested but not received (10 per cent), not requested (10 per cent) or received but the information was insufficient (10 per cent).</p> <p>Similarly with safeguarding checks, in 27 per cent of cases information was received but was of insufficient detail. In five per cent of cases information was requested but not received or in 17 per cent of cases information was not requested.</p>	<p>Some progress (compared with the 2022 inspection)</p>	<p>Yes</p>
<p>Ensure all administrative staff receive the training they need in order to complete the full range of duties following unification.</p>	<p>This related to two competing systems at the time of the last inspection and is therefore no longer relevant</p>	<p>No longer applicable</p>	<p>No longer applicable</p>
<p>Prioritise quality assurance of current case supervision. (Note: this was a recommendation to the East of England but is included as it is relevant for this PDU.)</p>	<p>While systems and processes had improved since the previous inspection and there was a significantly greater emphasis on quality assurance, this was still not manifesting significantly in the quality of the work we reviewed.</p>	<p>Some</p>	<p>Yes</p>

Annexe one – Web links

Full data from this inspection and further information about the methodology used to conduct this inspection is available [on our website](#).

A glossary of terms used in this report is available on our website using the following link: [Glossary \(justiceinspectors.gov.uk\)](https://justiceinspectors.gov.uk)