



Exploring Key Messages from the Rehabilitating Probation Project



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[Rehabilitating Probation: Rebuilding Culture, Identity and Legitimacy in a Reformed Public Service](#) is an ESRC-funded research project that has been underway since January 2022. The project investigates the implementation, experience, and impact of a major and unprecedented programme of public service reform: the reintegration of previously outsourced probation services back into the public sector.

Over the course of the project, the research team has conducted 340 interviews with a wide range

of stakeholders. These include national policymakers, regional probation directors, probation managers and staff within a selected case study region, and representatives from partner organisations across the criminal justice system. We have run a series of workshops - co-designed and delivered with peer researchers involved in the project - with different people who have experience of probation. This comprehensive engagement allows the project to assess the effects of reform at local, regional, and national levels (see Millings et al. 2023 for more details).

A distinctive strength of this study lies in its ability to follow up with probation leaders and practitioners who first participated in the earlier Devolving Probation Services project, also funded by the ESRC, over a decade ago. This longitudinal perspective enables the research to provide a deeper understanding of the long-term impacts and legacies of organisational reform in the criminal justice system.

We identify four dominant themes, amongst others, from our research that cut across the work packages and help shape some of the key messages from the project.

Operating within a Climate of Change Trauma

Frequent organisational change, chronic staff shortages, and persistent issues with the physical working environment have made working in probation exceptionally challenging for many. These pressures have directly affected staff well-being and their capacity to perform effectively in their roles.

Across all 270 interviews with probation policymakers, managers and practitioners, the time and energy devoted to understanding and implementing change emerged as a dominant and recurring theme. While there is widespread recognition that change is an inevitable aspect of organisational life, staff at every level consistently emphasised how consuming and disruptive these processes have been (Annison et al, 2023). One Regional Probation Director (RPD) estimated that *“80% of their time over the past decade was spent on change management rather than core business,”* while a Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) lead reflected that they had spent *“70% of their time over the last ten years delivering and responding to the fallout of change”*. Many interviewees remarked on the

way careers in probation are often tracked not by years, but by reference points such as *“Trust,” “pre- or post-Transforming Rehabilitation (TR),”* or *“before or after Unification”*.

This prolonged period of organisational upheaval, exacerbated by the impact of Covid-19 restrictions and widespread staffing shortages, has led many participants to speak openly about working in a service that feels perpetually in crisis (Millings et al. 2023). The language of trauma, used neither casually nor lightly, featured prominently in interviews, particularly among longer-serving staff. As one Probation Services Officer (PSO) noted, *“What you used to get through the door was traumatised offenders—now you’ve got traumatised staff”*. One Senior HMPPS Manager shared a striking reflection: *“It wasn’t until I saw the physiological reaction of people when TR was mentioned that I realised how significant that trauma is for many.”*

Probation Craftwork

The commitment of probation staff to balancing care and control remains strong. However, there are growing concerns about the formal and informal structures that support the development and sustainability of professional practice, which many describe as the *“craft”* of probation work.

Despite the significant challenges facing the sector, our research consistently documented a deep sense of loyalty and dedication to the work and the communities practitioners serve (see Robinson et al. 2025). That said, probation managers and practitioners frequently commented on the evolving nature – or *character* – of the service. While staffing numbers may no longer be the primary concern, the pace and nature of exposure to frontline practice has changed dramatically.

In many Probation Delivery Units (PDUs), close to half of all staff have been in post for less than two years, and a substantial proportion of these new practitioners have had access only to online training.

The desire to develop a strong professional identity and deepen practice skills was echoed across all staff levels. New recruits often reported feeling under-prepared and guilty for seeking help from already overstretched colleagues. Experienced staff expressed frustration at being unable to offer the kind of mentorship and support they themselves had benefited from earlier in their careers. Across the board, there was a shared call for more opportunities to reflect on and strengthen professional practice.

Although these concerns are widely recognised, the current climate can foster feelings of resentment and professional isolation. While most participants voiced concern about the overall quality of service delivery, 70% of our practitioner sample in our case study area nonetheless reported feeling confident in their ability to perform their duties, highlighting a potential disconnect between individual competence and collective capacity.

Visibility, Voice, and Legitimacy in Probation

Criminal justice partners both value and depend on a probation service that offers a distinct perspective; one that contributes meaningfully to shaping decisions and delivering justice through a

whole-systems approach. However, the highly public and often critical discourse surrounding probation reform – framed in terms such as “reset” and “strengthening” – has unsettled confidence in the service (Robinson et al. 2023). This episodic loss of legitimacy risks becoming more sustained and systemic if probation continues to be viewed by partners as an *‘under-resourced public service without the capacity or capability to deliver what a society wants’* (Senior Criminal Justice Partner).

Our research, which has included interviews with partners across courts, prisons, youth justice, and the police, consistently revealed two key themes:

- **Widespread Sympathy and Recognition:** Partners express deep sympathy for a probation service visibly impacted by repeated organisational change and chronic staffing challenges. There is also a strong and consistent belief in the value and distinctiveness of probation’s role within the wider criminal justice system.
- **Respect for Probation’s Professional Contribution:** Criminal justice professionals recognise probation’s holistic approach – its focus on the “whole person” – as well as the constructive challenge it brings to multi-agency working. The professional standing of probation practitioners, combined with the credibility of its leadership and the institutional memory held by long-serving staff, continues to underpin positive perceptions of the service’s legitimacy.

However, these positive perceptions are under increasing strain. The damage caused by the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) reforms, while initially viewed as temporary, now threatens to leave a longer-lasting imprint on probation's legitimacy. There is also growing recognition within the service that more visible advocacy – championing probation's role and contribution to external audiences – is essential to counter dominant narratives and reinforce its standing within the criminal justice landscape (see Millings et al. 2025).

Individual and Collective Operational Vulnerability in Probation

A pervasive sense of uncertainty and heightened scrutiny has fostered forms of both individual and collective vulnerability across the probation workforce. This atmosphere, marked by an anticipation of further criticism, has had a tangible impact on practitioner' confidence, morale, and their perception of professional security.

Day-to-day decision-making increasingly reflects this organisational fragility. Routine tasks, whether signposting, referring, commissioning, monitoring, managing, or supporting, now take place within a climate of defensiveness rather than confidence, reflecting wider systemic pressures and ambiguity about the core purpose of the service.

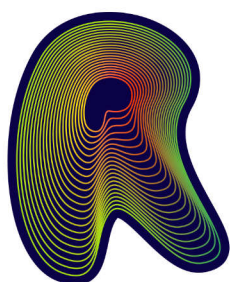
Through three phases of research, we have captured staff experiences before, during, and after HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) inspections. Many spoke candidly about the

emotional toll of negative inspection outcomes – not just in their own regions, but across the service. These judgements leave lasting imprints on morale, even as staff consistently express support for the principle of external accountability. Staff describe an internal struggle between their aspiration to deliver high-quality work and the constraints imposed by operational realities.

This vulnerability is further amplified by the psychological and operational impact of serious further offence (SFO) reviews and rapid policy shifts such as the End of Custody Supervised Licence (ECSL) and the Standard Determinate Sentence (SDS) measures. These events force staff to confront two persistent tensions:

- 1. Self-Preservation versus Broader Professional Commitment** - staff often feel compelled to narrow their focus to immediate, measurable tasks in their own domains – an act of self-protection in a high-stakes environment.
- 2. Purpose versus Practicality** - practitioners are frequently left questioning what probation is meant to be and whether the system enables them to enact its values in practice.

These dilemmas are most acute within sentence management roles, where staff report the lowest levels of long-term career confidence. Sentence managers often feel less empowered to drive meaningful change, experience higher administrative burdens, and face greater emotional strain than colleagues in specialist or support roles.



Rehabilitating Probation

Final Comment

The themes emerging from our research highlight the significant adversity faced by probation practitioners since the unification of the service in June 2021. These challenges – consistently described across interviews – reflect a profession stretched by sustained change, high workloads, and deep systemic pressures. In her February 2025 statement outlining a new vision for probation, the Secretary of State for Justice Shabana Mahmood (2025), made several important commitments that acknowledged these concerns and signalled a renewed effort to strengthen the service. Notably, the pledge to recruit 1,300 new trainee probation officers and to create conditions that allow practitioners to “focus their time where it has greatest impact” followed a frank admission that, just six months earlier, the service had been “burdened with a workload that was, quite simply, impossible”.

Equally striking was the Justice Secretary's recognition of the workforce as “professionals of whom we have asked so much in recent years”. This sentiment strongly resonates with the probation staff we have interviewed – many of whom regard unification as a painful but necessary process and continue to demonstrate resilience, commitment, and belief in the potential for meaningful rehabilitation of those they work with, and the service they work for.

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