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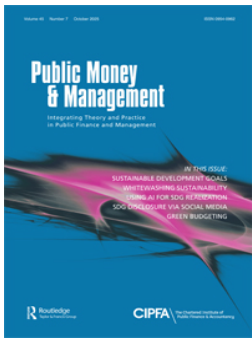
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<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4379-9070> (2025) Lessons for public**

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Lessons for public management reform from the insourcing of the Probation Service of England and Wales

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IMPACT

This article provides lessons for policy-makers and organizational leaders based on a case study of the renationalization of probation services in England and Wales: a rare case of whole service insourcing. These are as follows: first, that structural change—interacting always with an organization's longer history of reforms—represents an extraordinary energy drain on those involved at every level of a public service. Second, formal milestones of change cannot be taken for granted. Perceptions around progress and timescales will differ considerably, with important consequences. Third, structural reform can address, but also create, challenges regarding the need to achieve an organization's (re-)legitimation among stakeholders. A renewed focus upon practice, the craft of the public service practitioner, should be at the core of considerations around public management and its reform.

ABSTRACT

This article responds to calls for fine-grained studies of public management reform, presenting findings from a major longitudinal research project examining the renationalization of probation services in England and Wales: a case study of the rare phenomenon of whole service insourcing. The authors provide three central insights: First, they demonstrate the enduring imprint of prior outsourcing on how further change programmes are experienced. Second, they demonstrate how change is experienced at different 'speeds' and 'trajectories'. Third, structural reforms do not in themselves resolve complex challenges for the (re-)legitimation of an insourced organization in its wider field. The authors encourage further cross-fertilization between public management insights and emergent arguments towards 'mission' oriented government; arguing that both perspectives must operate in service to the grounded practice, the public sector craft, that an organisation is seeking to achieve.

KEYWORDS

Craft; criminal justice; insourcing; legitimacy; mission-driven government; public service reform; probation; renationalization

Introduction

For decades now, public services have been delivered through a wide spectrum of models, from complete privatization to nationalization, via alternatives such as municipalization. This reflects a fundamental debate: Should central government actively administer public service provision or seek to co-ordinate a mixed economy of national and local service delivery? Attendant debates, in particular about the extent to which public services might be re-oriented around 'missions', are playing out in a range of national and international contexts (Mazzucato et al., 2024), and being brought into sharp focus in the UK, where the Labour government's election manifesto identified 'five missions to rebuild Britain' (Labour Party, 2024). These missions were: kickstart economic growth; make Britain a clean energy superpower; take back our streets; break down barriers to opportunity; and build an NHS fit for the future (Labour Party, 2024).

These debates necessarily foreground questions about the nature and impact of public management reform and the processes of structural change. Public sector reform programmes always involve 'rebuilding the ship while sailing it' (Elston, 2024, p. 5): managing ongoing service provision while simultaneously enacting potentially radical

reform. While there is a considerable body of literature on public management reform (see Elston, 2024), scope for it to be informed by in-depth case study analyses of 'the effects of the reorganization process within restructuring organizations in more fine-grained detail' (Andrews & Boyne, 2012, p. 310) remains.

This article responds to this need, presenting findings from a major longitudinal research project that examined the wholesale insourcing of core probation services in England and Wales. In the early 2010s, there was a foundational restructuring undertaken in order to enable the outsourcing of the majority of probation work, a process fully implemented by 2015. However, by 2019, ministers within an iteration of the same (Conservative) government concluded that these reforms had so comprehensively failed that insourcing was required; termed the 'unification' of probation services.

Thus, in a few years, a version of the same Conservative government that implemented the radical privatization of probation services came to implement, at pace, reforms that proceeded in an opposite ideological direction. This did not represent probation's return to its prior (relatively) decentralized public sector framework previously structured as 35 public sector trusts. Instead, it saw the creation of a

nationally centralized public service organization: the 'Probation Service'.

Our case study is valuable due to the insights it provides for public management generally, but also due to the substantive importance of probation. It plays an essential role in public safety, pursuing both public protection and rehabilitative goals. It fulfils important supportive functions for criminal justice as a whole, including advising the court to assist with sentencing decisions, supervising people convicted of offences in the community, overseeing unpaid work (punishment in the community), collaborating with the police on public protection, and contributing to the parole process. At the end of December 2024, just over 240,000 people were under probation supervision, compared with a prison population of 85,372, illustrating that probation's caseload is many times larger than that of prisons at any given point (see <https://data.justice.gov.uk>). Yet spending is weighted in the opposite direction: the National Audit Office (2024) reported that, in 2023–24, the Ministry of Justice allocated £1,407 million to probation and £3,554 million to prisons—the latter figure driven largely by prison construction and other capital investment programmes.

We draw on our research to provide three central lessons for those studying or enacting public management reforms:

- First, we demonstrate the enduring imprint of prior outsourcing on how any further change programmes are experienced, showing how the long shadow of earlier structural reform creates an extraordinary energy drain on those involved at every level of a public service. The persistent disruption tends to destabilize the foundations upon which practitioners operate and, in turn, diminishes the ability of leaders to focus on supporting purposeful, high-quality practice.
- Second, we demonstrate the need to interrogate conceptions of successful change. Our multi-layered research design allows us to identify how change is experienced at different 'speeds' and 'trajectories', meaning that formal milestones of change cannot be taken for granted. We suggest that determining when a reform programme has ended, or even when it initially began, is an open question. Our findings show that while the insourcing process that created the Probation Service represented in one sense the end of a change programme, for many practitioners, it represented merely one waypoint along a longer journey, and the trigger for an even more intense period of processing and managing change (see Millings et al., 2023, 2025).
- Third, we identify the challenges posed for the (re-)legitimation of an insourced organization in its wider field. We show that, within its organizational field, probation retains an enduring moral legitimacy, with insourcing removing what some stakeholders regarded as the 'taint' of private sector involvement. Further, we see that for many stakeholder respondents, probation is regarded as a taken-for-granted part of the criminal justice 'architecture' (i.e. has cognitive legitimacy). However, we show that probation is facing growing challenges in terms of pragmatic legitimacy: its ability to meet the substantive needs of partners.

We conclude this article by identifying the extent to which probation debates regarding its desirable grounding

principles align with current debates regarding the scope for mission-driven conceptualizations of the way public services are delivered and the role of the state therein. We argue that probation epitomises the characteristic of many public services as being grounded in craft, in professional practice: and that it is this—and practitioners' own sense of mission and purpose—that must be empowered in any further public management reforms.

Literature review: What is known about insourcing?

Understanding insourcing, including its motivations and the lessons learned from it, necessitates recognizing its role within the broader context of public management reform. Elston (2024, p. 4) defines public management reform as 'deliberate, planned policy-making by a central authority that seeks to change how public services are managed across multiple sites simultaneously'. Emerging policies tend to concentrate on the management of public service delivery rather than its substance and are typically accompanied by waves of organizational restructuring. These may take the form of mergers or de-mergers, new performance monitoring and appraisal regimes, changes to budgeting processes, shifts in personnel recruitment and reward strategies, or increased outsourcing to private or third sector providers (Elston, 2024).

'Outsourcing', and its related term 'insourcing', therefore, describe organizational choices about who delivers particular services (whether that is IT support for a business, or refuse collection for a populace). While outsourcing involves transferring provision to an external provider, insourcing denotes the re-absorption of a service back into the organization (Albalade et al., 2024). Insourcing is, at least theoretically, a neutral act that need not have wider normative features. By contrast, some scholars and activists argue for 're-municipalization', a term which usually denotes a desire not only to unwind privatized models of public service delivery, but to advance a vision 'that centres on democratic participation and control' (Kishimoto et al., 2020).

The associated term '(re-)nationalization' can also be noted. While there tends to be some slippage in the definitional boundaries of these various terms (and in much debate they simply go undefined), nationalization tends to speak to the question of ownership of the service and its associated assets (for example water companies, or power infrastructure). By contrast, insourcing usually speaks to the question of the manner by which the service is provided. There will usually be significant overlap in practice between the two, but they are conceptually distinct.

Insourcing often denotes the returning of a service to public delivery, sometimes termed 'reverse contracting', 're-contracting', or 'backsourcing' (see Elston, 2024). These terms collectively describe the strategic decision to discontinue an outsourcing arrangement, whether this occurs through a deliberate and planned process at the contract's natural expiration, or through an unplanned and/or premature termination (Berlin et al., 2023).

Early public management reform initiatives emphasised the outsourcing or privatization of essential public sector functions, such as public transport, social care, waste management and prison management, to private entities

(Bovaird, 2016). Such initiatives, dubbed ‘new public management’ (NPM) sought to leverage private sector efficiencies although their success was often contingent upon a myriad of disparate, context-specific factors (Bovaird, 2016). As NPM aged, mixed outcomes from its implementation coupled with concerns related to compliance with democratic ideals precipitated a renewed focus on returning public services to direct public provision (Hefetz & Warner, 2004).

Prior research has emphasized that these two approaches—outsourcing and insourcing—should not be seen as binary opposing states. Rather, they can be understood as points along a continuum, with organizations’ choices between them shaped by practical considerations that often produce hybrid arrangements positioned at different points along the spectrum (Jansson et al., 2021). Further, the relationship between them is strikingly dynamic and iterative. As Hefetz and Warner (2004) explain: ‘privatization is not a one-way street. Government managers contract out and back in as they seek to balance efficiency and voice within the constraints of local market contexts’ (p. 187).

Hefetz and Warner (2004) found in their longitudinal study that between 1992 and 1997, of their 628 local government respondents over 90% had initiated the outsourcing of at least one service, while over 80% had brought back ‘in house’ at least one previously outsourced service. This means that in some areas, practitioners operate with ongoing uncertainty about whether change may be on the horizon.

The literature also shows that successful implementation of sustainable public management reforms, such as the reintegration of previously outsourced services, faces significant challenges (Bovaird, 2016). From the point of view of those driving reforms, challenges include resistance from entrenched interests aiming to maintain the status quo, the substantial logistical and financial burdens associated with the transition, the difficulty in maintaining continuous public engagement to ensure successful implementation beyond the initial phase, and the complex dynamics of competing stakeholder interests (Albalade et al., 2022). Moreover, even when such challenges are successfully navigated, tailored approaches are required at implementation to improve the long-run prospects of success (Barber, 2017; Elston, 2024).

It is commonly argued, therefore, that a decision to insource must be accompanied by full understanding of the outsourced service, as well as the development of robust plans for delivery that cover the transition process as well as the process of implementation (Sasse et al., 2020). Appointing capable managers who can effectively oversee the transition, while simultaneously securing the trust and support of key stakeholders, is also emphasized (Sasse et al., 2020). Some scholars have argued for the maintenance of competitive pressures on the insourced service through monitoring and benchmarking (Jansson et al., 2021), while others have highlighted the dangers this can pose for staff morale (Olejarski & Neal, 2024).

The insourcing of the Probation Service of England and Wales

The extent to which probation has been subject, especially over the past decade, to efforts foundationally to ‘rebuild

the ship while sailing it’ (Elston, 2024, p. 5) is for many observers astonishing. It is hard, if not impossible, to find a similar example of the transition of a core public service in a manner that goes far beyond the re-contracting, for example, of a particular prison.

In the early years of the 21st century, probation services in England and Wales were organized along a public, decentralized model, with probation delivered by 35 probation ‘trusts’. Probation services were then subject to ‘Transforming Rehabilitation’ (TR) reforms, only proposed in any detail in 2012 and implemented by 2014. These reflected the apotheosis of a neoliberal vision for public services: the privatization and decentralization of probation being believed to unleash innovation and dramatic, previously unachieved, successes in outcomes (Annison, 2022).

The existing service was restructured at pace, replaced by a network of new organizations. Twenty-one community rehabilitation companies (CRCs) were created; to be responsible only for the supervision of medium- and low-risk offenders. A newly-constructed National Probation Service (NPS) had seven geographical divisions and was to be responsible for the supervision of offenders assessed to be high risk, as well as the provision of services to courts including pre-sentence reports. Staff were—often unwillingly—assigned to a CRC or NPS role, impacting their employment status, contract terms and sometimes their self-conception as a (public sector) probation officer (Robinson et al., 2016).

The CRC contracts were awarded to eight new providers, seven of which were private sector companies or partnerships led by private sector interests. The scope of probation supervision was increased to include people serving less than a year in prison (who had previously been excluded from statutory supervision). This increased the estimated caseloads, and thus potential revenues, for these providers.

The vision, never fully realized in practice, was to integrate a ‘payment by results’ element. This was argued to see the taxpayer benefiting twice over: the private sector would take on the burden of investing in these services, effectively placing ‘bets’ on their future potential financial outcomes. If this failed, the private sector would bear the financial weight; if it succeeded (positive outcomes for those subject to probation supervision), taxpayers would gladly reward this with additional payments (Annison, 2022).

The vast majority of probation scholars and practitioners were opposed to the reforms, highlighting a range of concerns about what they saw as a reckless, ideologically driven initiative. The UK House of Commons Justice Select Committee observed in 2014 that: ‘witnesses, including some supportive of the proposed changes, had significant apprehensions about the scale, architecture, details and consequences of the reforms and the pace at which the government is seeking to implement them’ (Justice Committee, 2014, p. 57)

Several years after implementation, the National Audit Office assessed that the processes between the public and private probation organizations were still ‘not yet working smoothly’, reflecting reforms that ‘were designed and implemented without sufficient testing’ (National Audit Office, 2019, p. 8). The commercial approach adopted was ‘inappropriate’ (National Audit Office, 2019, p. 9). Some of

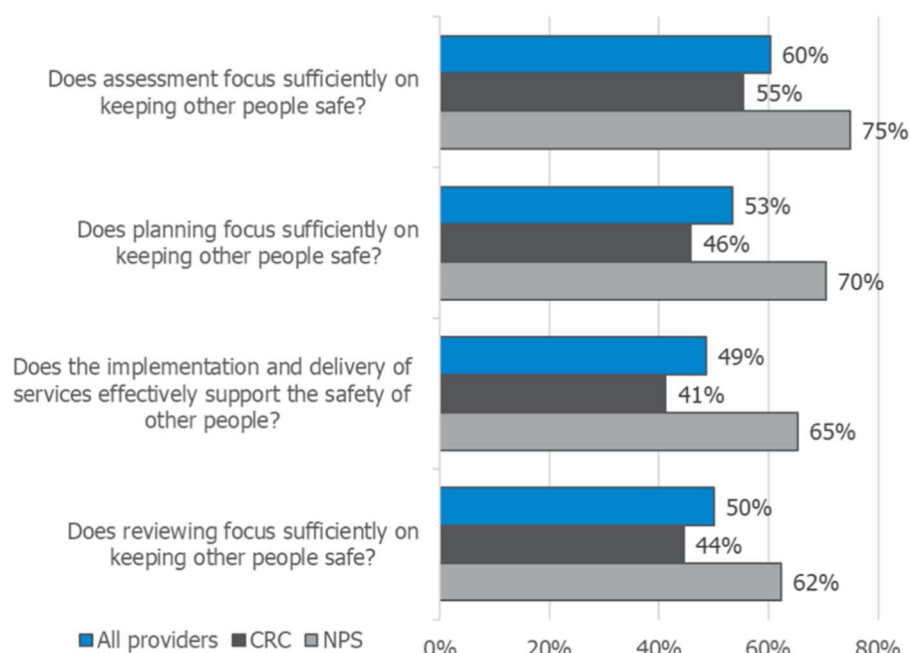


Figure 1. Proportion of cases judged as sufficient, protecting the public from serious harm. Source: HM Chief Inspector of Probation, 2018–19 Summary Report.

the CRCs collapsed, while the remainder were propped up with over £500 million of additional financial support (National Audit Office, 2019).

In terms of substantive performance, in 2019 the Probation Inspectorate reported a clear distinction between the NPS (public) and CRC (private) performance, ‘with 5 of 7 NPS rated “good” but only one of the 21 CRCs’ (HM Chief Inspector of Probation, 2019, p. 4). Risk to the public was a particular concern, with a ‘large gap’ identified between the quality of casework delivered by the NPS and CRCs relating to the management of risk (see Figure 1).

In 2018, only four years on from the implementation of the major outsourcing programme, the government launched a consultation on the future of probation services. This process ultimately resulted in plans for all offender supervision to be brought under the domain of a (public sector) ‘Probation Service’ (Ministry of, 2019). With the arrival of the Covid 19 pandemic cited as an important factor, it was also decided that the delivery of major areas of activity such as unpaid work and structured interventions—which were originally expected to remain outsourced—were also to be insourced. This reflects a common insourcing dynamic, often being motivated by pragmatic concerns about (failures of) consistent service delivery (Jansson et al., 2021).

A version of the same Conservative government that implemented the radical privatization of probation services (informed by a form of neoliberal ideology) thereby came to implement at pace reforms that by contrast fully brought probation within the public sector. The chosen terminology was one of the ‘unification’ of probation services. This did not represent a return to the prior decentralized public sector framework. Rather, and for the first time in its history, probation became a centralized public service; all probation staff became civil servants. There remain elements of a mixed market, primarily through the services provided by private and voluntary sector providing through the ‘commissioned

rehabilitative services’ process. In addition, the electronic monitoring of people on probation has always been contracted to a private provider.

The research project

Our research project, ‘Rehabilitating Probation’, is a major ESRC-funded project that has examined this process of probation insourcing longitudinally, through five work packages. We conducted 340 research interviews, obtaining first-hand accounts of the impact of organizational change at local, regional and national levels. This research received university and HMPPS National Research Committee ethical approval. The interviews captured a range of perspectives, within and outside of probation: understanding the development and implementation of the insourcing reforms, as well as how they were experienced.

We conducted three annual sweeps of interviews with groups including frontline probation practitioners ($N=191$); regional probation leaders ($N=38$); local and national criminal justice stakeholders ($N=70$); and national policy-makers and operational leads ($N=41$). In addition, we facilitated five workshops with people who had experience of probation, co-designed with peer researchers (see Figure 2).

Our longitudinal approach enabled us to conduct repeat interviews with the same individuals at each annual sweep, capturing the experiences of structural reform as an ongoing process. Our interviews included prompts regarding the alignment (or otherwise) between the formal stages of change and the lived experience, and respondents’ views of the lessons to be drawn from the period (see Millings et al., 2023, 2025).

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured, which allowed for a level of code-based analysis drawing initially on the prompts asked on relevant themes. The thematic analysis was then refined by further coding. Analysis of interviews with different cohorts (and sweeps of interviews therein) have been published in other papers considering specific conceptual

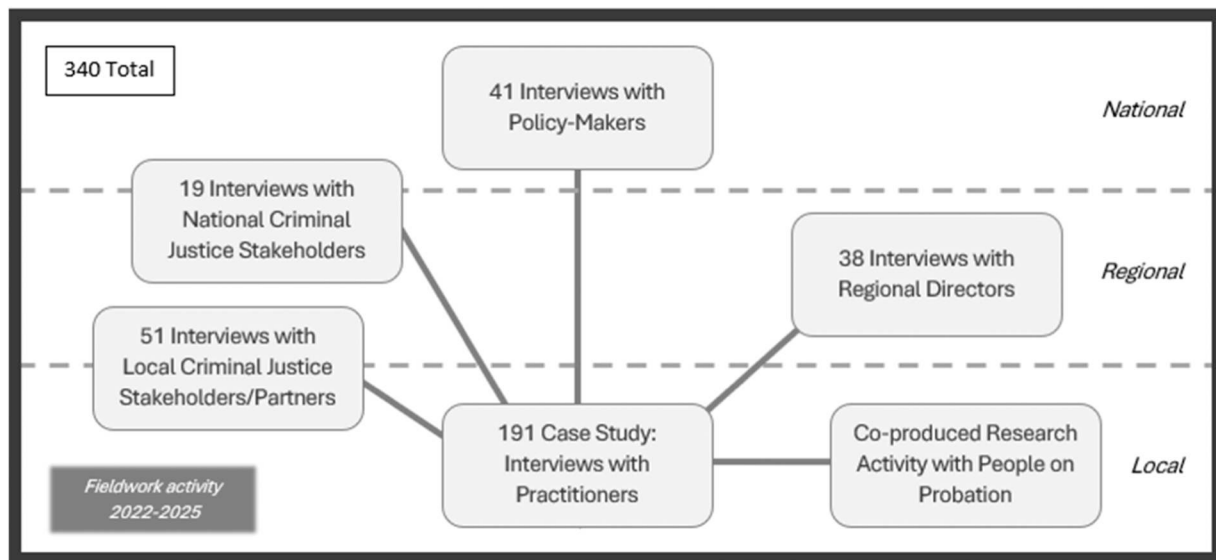


Figure 2. Rehabilitating Probation fieldwork activity.

issues (see Annison et al., 2024; Millings et al., 2023, 2025; Robinson et al., 2023). More detailed discussion of methods is provided in each paper. Here, we draw out the broader insights from our analysis for public management.

Quotes presented below are ascribed to the relevant general role of the respondent. At appropriate points, we direct the reader towards a project publication that provides more detailed discussion of a specific issue, and more detailed examination of the underlying data therein.

Lessons from probation insourcing

Key lessons from our research findings comprise: the enduring imprint of prior outsourcing; interrogating conceptions of successful change; and recognizing the challenges of (re-)legitimation in an organizational field.

The enduring imprint of prior outsourcing

It wasn't until I saw the physiological reaction of [staff] when [part-privatization programme] TR was mentioned that I realized how significant that trauma is for many (senior probation leader).

We have observed above that outsourcing and insourcing are interdependent phenomena within public management (Jansson et al., 2021), with some services being prone to recurring shifts between public and private delivery. Our close examination of the probation case study draws out the human impact of such dynamics. Our research has captured the considerable emotional and psychological toll that ongoing processes of change have on a workforce, and the role played by the lingering effects of past structural change.

Probation practitioner respondents spoke of the trauma that the structural changes they experienced had caused; for many staff the challenges of insourcing were compounded by older traumas related to the prior splitting of the service. For those who had experienced the earlier reform programme, the 'unwanted divorce' (Robinson et al., 2016), and its negative toll, still reverberated. Remnants of this period were often visible during research interview visits to probation offices, with outdated signage from the

previous era remaining, sometimes for years. This evoked lingering ghosts: echoes of past upheavals and the challenges posed for practitioners' sense of occupational identity therein (Burke et al., 2017; Millings et al., 2019).

It is also important to recognize the ongoing salience of probation's much longer history of structural change, for many involved in its governance and practice. It was commonplace in research interviews across the three-year period to hear probation leaders and some longer-serving practitioners use 'the trust days' (2007–2014) as a grounding reference point. It was observed by one practitioner that 'in probation careers you don't talk in years. You plot whether you worked in a trust, whether you were pre or post TR, before or after [insourcing]' (probation officer).

Especially in the first year post-insourcing, we were often told by probation staff about 'culture-clash' dynamics. Practitioners who had worked in CRCs, many of whom had been recruited post-split, were 'coming in with a slightly different head' having worked in a 'different space' (probation officer), a more commercial space that in hindsight some considered provided greater freedoms. On the other hand, NPS-based staff were not new to the bureaucracy and constraints of the civil service; they were also perceived by many CRC staff to have a sense of superiority (see further Millings et al., 2023).

CRC was seen by many to be treated like 'a dirty word', stigmatized as a failed experiment, by contrast to the notion 'that NPSs deliver good, solid risk management' (probation service officer). A catchphrase pressed by leaders of the structural reform programme was that the insourcing process was a 'merger not a takeover' (policy-maker), but many practitioners perceived the opposite. In any case, the corporate nature of the phrase in itself was recognized by national leaders to have landed badly with a workforce driven by a sense of public-spirited vocation (Annison et al., 2024; Millings et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2025).

Some respondents considered that many 'have still got hangovers' from the waves of structural reforms (regional probation leader), which this respondent told us had necessitated more 'conversations about endings' than were initially anticipated. This speaks to the notion of

'repetitive change injury' developed within public management literature (Wynen et al., 2019). This observes not only that 'structural reforms, irrespective of their origin and rationale, generate uncertainty and a lack of control throughout the organization, which will lead to stress and anxiety' (Wynen et al., 2019, p. 699), but that the accumulation of discrete structural reforms has effects 'beyond what may be expected of individual reforms' (Wynen et al., 2019, p. 699).

Staff who had remained in the nationalized part of the probation service throughout both periods found much familiar about their organizational structure and operational priorities (and the 'new' organization adopted their 'old' branding). But practitioners who transitioned from the private CRC organizations found themselves required to undertake additional training, to adopt new systems (thus jettisoning any novel tools developed by the CRCs), and to become bound by the Civil Service Code (which, at least for some, was experienced as undermining probation practitioners' ability to contribute publicly to wider debates about social justice). They lost their employing organization: their 'ships' had been scuttled (to continue Elston's earlier-noted imagery). And for many there was a sense of loss: of autonomy in their work, of access to services for people under supervision, and of agency in their professional journey.

While the situation for many practitioners in the case study area seemed to have eased somewhat over time (Millings et al., 2025), a senior national leader observed, with some concern, that even in a recent internal report that crossed their desk (in winter 2024) there was reference to some ex-CRC staff feeling that their past was having an impact on how they were treated by current colleagues. This is perhaps unsurprising given that insourcing was framed in terms of the salvaging of probation from a failed privatization initiative (Annison et al., 2024).

But precisely how, and why, the TR initiative failed was never sufficiently interrogated or narrated by senior leaders. Relevant considerations include the roles and suitability of the delivery model chosen for outsourcing, associated systems and processes of regulation and governance, (misplaced) assumptions about caseloads, and in particular the strength of contractual oversight. The views that may emerge from such an evaluation will have a significant impact on the extent to which the insourcing programme in itself could be expected to resolve the issues observed.

Certainly, from a practitioner perspective, state activism, in the form of the imposition of recurrent change from above, was reported by many to be a central dynamic of their experience across their whole time working in probation. We observe below how the prisons capacity crisis means that these dynamics have continued unabated.

Conceptions of successful change

Major organizational reforms face common dangers, with the potential failure of a wide range of prosaic but essential systems or processes involving for example staff pay, data management, service delivery (Elston, 2024). Against the heavily attenuated expectations of avoiding catastrophe, the change programme to implement the insourcing of probation was considered by informed observers to be a success (Johal & Davies, 2022). The 'Day 1' essentials,

including the 'lift and shift' of staff into a singular 'Probation Service', largely worked.

However, our longitudinal research, engaging with probation practitioners, leaders and stakeholders at national, regional and local levels, draws out how much is missed if one only relies on such 'top level' framings of successful change management. One example of this features regional leaders' growing frustration with the extent to which elements of the target operating model (TOM) (the blueprint for unification and service delivery) timeline became increasingly fictional. The TOM envisaged four periods:

- Transition (June–September 2021).
- Stabilization (September–December 2021).
- Harmonization (January–March 2022).
- Transformation (April 2022–2024 and beyond) (HMPPS, 2021, p. 36).

However, speaking in spring 2022 (one year after insourcing and notionally into the period of 'transformation'), one regional leader told us:

All 12 regions, I can say without a shadow of a doubt, are kind of hovering between [the stages of] 'transition' and 'stabilization'. So there is a lot of stabilization work that we are still having to do. Because what [the blueprint] assumes is, it assumes you are operating somewhere between 85 to 90% of the workforce you need to deliver the structural change. It is also assuming that you are not trying to recover from a pandemic.

The TOM was recognized as a useful political tool (explaining to ministers the insourcing journey and its various stages, and encouraging Treasury support for additional funding). But it was problematic as it set unrealistic expectations around what could be achieved and by when. As the 'on-the-ground' dynamics of probation delivery became increasingly detached from the TOM timescales, there was a growing concern about 'over selling and under delivering' (regional probation leader) (see, further, Robinson et al., 2023).

'Frontline' probation practitioners in the second sweep of interviews (2023) shared similar sentiments about the ongoing challenges of embedding new working practices and fostering confidence among colleagues to deliver them. Staff were reaching 'saturation point' with 'process and information overload' (probation officer), as policies and requirements continued to pour towards them from the national 'centre' (see Millings et al., 2025). For this staff group, as with the regional leaders, the 'transformational' period envisaged by the TOM remained a distant prospect (HM Inspector of Probation, 2024).

Meanwhile, for the 12 regional probation leaders, there was considerable frustration that the unceasing organizational changes, the growing bureaucratic complexity and the wider contextual pressures, left them unable to devote their energies towards fostering good probation practice. They wanted to enable staff to focus on the on-the-ground, day-to-day, relational work with people on probation that many considered to be the core of the profession. One regional leader estimated that 80% of their time in the past decade had 'centred on change management and not core business'. This speaks to literature on the considerable disruption to 'business as usual' public service performance that is caused by

(especially recurring) organizational reforms (Andrews & Boyne, 2012).

Despite stormy conditions, the intention by leaders was to press on with driving up quality in areas of core practice. However, a prisons capacity crisis that had persisted for years reached breaking point in 2024 (Owers, 2025). This significantly disrupted probation practice, through emergency measures including the early release of some prisoners to prevent system overload. All of this had considerable and lasting knock-on ramifications for probation, expanding its caseload, disrupting plans already made for release support for those prisoners, and/or requiring intended interventions to be accelerated (Owers, 2025).

Additionally, staff morale has been negatively affected by a growing narrative of concern around the quality and consistency of the substantive work done by the Probation Service. These concerns are recognized internally and seen publicly through consistently critical inspection reports by the HM Probation Inspectorate (HMIP, 2025) as well as through media reporting of inquests into high profile serious further offences. We saw concern from some 'middle managers' and regional leaders that staff were tending towards a defensive approach that focused more on 'ticking the boxes' rather than more confidently seeking to achieve 'the fine balance between public protection and rehabilitation' (Local probation senior manager).

The TOM envisaged 'enabling our workforce to be their best' (HMPPS, 2021, p. 12) and 'empowering regional leaders to make decisions about what works in their communities and to make effective plans for future delivery' (HMPPS, 2021, p. 132). If, therefore, the definition of success for this reform programme is understood as staff feeling empowered to use their professional judgement in individual cases, within a supportive and relatively settled environment, this remains unachieved (Millings et al., 2025).

These collective observations draw out the extent to which definitions of 'success' in public management reforms must be treated with caution. The timescale and horizons of a reform programme should be approached (in part) as an interpretive question, where different stakeholders will likely have a variety of equally plausible experiences and narratives, depending on the cultures and power dynamics in play.

(Re-)legitimation in an organizational field

For ministers and senior civil servants, a central priority of probation renationalization was ensuring that the Probation Service 'commands the confidence of the courts' (Ministry of, 2019, p. 3). This was recognized universally by regional probation leaders, who considered that 'sentencers didn't know what the hell was going on' under the privatized system, with judges often 'distrustful of the private sector' (see further Robinson et al., 2023). Regional probation leaders also prioritized strong relationships with a wider range of partners, with the police most often cited.

In advance of the renationalization of probation, one of us had considered the types of external legitimacy that probation would need to seek to achieve (see Robinson, 2021). This understands legitimacy as involving pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy and cognitive legitimacy. The first speaks to the self-interested or instrumental

evaluations of an organization's behaviour or policies: in short, does probation and its activity benefit the evaluating organization? The second speaks to judgements about whether the organization and its activities are 'the right thing to do', or in accordance with shared value systems. The third indicates the situation where an organization has, or achieves, a 'taken for grantedness' that insulates it from significant scrutiny or critique (Robinson, 2021, p. 153).

Our research found that probation retains an enduring moral legitimacy with key stakeholders. The 'taint' of private sector involvement, which was perceived by many to clash with shared values, had been removed by insourcing. Sentencers we interviewed reported positive interactions with probation staff, and a positive view of the values that underpin probation work. Relatedly, regional probation leaders considered that the undoing of the splitting of probation into distinctive organizations was received positively: 'the feedback from our [police and crime commissioner], from the police, from the judiciary is that [insourcing] is very welcome. There is just one probation ... one probation voice' (regional probation leader).

Stakeholders and partners we interviewed spoke of the importance of the Probation Service, and their approval of the moral values it embodied. For example, police partners would speak of recognizing the sense of vocation that many people working in policing and probation shared. They also welcomed 'the constructive challenge to our way of thinking that comes from working with partners in probation' (police leader), who they perceived as being focused on community safety and prevention.

There was some evidence that this spoke also to the question of cognitive legitimacy: partners viewed probation as a desirable and taken-for-granted part of the criminal justice architecture. Often because they were seen to act as a beneficial connective tissue that joined together different organizations and approaches therein. There was a reluctance to imagine a world without probation.

However, we have observed already that probation faces difficulties that speak to the issue of pragmatic legitimacy. The damage widely perceived to have been wrought by its part-privatization, and the challenges of insourcing, meant that the renationalized Probation Service was facing considerable challenges from the start. The under-staffing situation was far worse than had been anticipated. The 'back-end' administrative support systems in place for the probation regions varied considerably.

Retention of staff has been an ongoing challenge (HMIP, 2025), reflecting wider public sector staffing challenges (Bezuidenhout, 2024). While there has been considerable investment in recruiting and training new probation officers, the service as a whole is becoming increasingly inexperienced. This has continually undermined the service's efforts to reach a position where it is able to demonstrate a consistently good level of practice. Recurrently negative inspection reports (HM Chief Inspector of Probation, 2025) point to these substantive issues. One police leader told us they perceived 'an under resourced public service without the capacity or capability to deliver what we as a society would perhaps want them to deliver'. Sentencers we interviewed raised concerns with us about whether the actual implementation of community order requirements (i.e. what probation does with convicted individuals) will be in line with sentencers' expectations in the context of ongoing and worsening pressures.

In addition, the vision for the renationalized Probation Service was to ‘enable regions to grant fund [a range of] activities which can address service gaps’ and ‘allow the regions to build the relationships and skills to make effective commissions’ (HMPPS, 2021). This would reflect the understanding that ‘the timely provision of a broad range of high-quality interventions is a key component of successful probation delivery’ (HM Inspector of Probation, 2024, p. 4). It would bolster probation’s legitimacy among partners—by bringing money to the table, to enable innovative work—as well as fostering probation’s relationship with the third and voluntary sector.

However, the systems and processes established have been criticised by third and voluntary sector organizations for imposing unnecessary administrative burdens and barriers, undermining the ability of groups well-placed in a locality to be commissioned to provide much-needed services (see <https://www.clinks.org/taxonomy/term/781>). Similarly, probation staff found the systems to be bureaucratic and clunky (HMIP, 2025). This contrasted with some CRCs of the privatized era, which some probation leader respondents considered had begun to show positive results through the innovation and experimentalism that their greater freedoms had enabled.

All of this, taken together, poses considerable challenges to the re-nationalized Probation Service’s pragmatic legitimacy. The credibility of probation leaders and some frontline staff—often through long-standing professional relationships—is helping sustain relatively positive judgements by partners of the Probation Service. However, the current strains on the service and resultant limits in the probation ‘offer’ risk causing more enduring legitimacy deficits.

This situation provides a cautionary tale for those considering public management reforms in other areas. It emphasizes the importance of the quality of the work being done by the organization and its instrumental value to other partners. During times of change, moral and cognitive legitimacy can only sustain an organization’s perceived legitimacy for so long.

Conclusion: Structural change and purposeful practice

In this article we have reported research findings from the examination of a public management reform programme of significant magnitude: the wholesale insourcing of core probation services in England and Wales, only seven years after its outsourcing. We summarise our three key resulting insights as follows.

First, we have seen the enduring imprint of prior outsourcing on how any further change programme is experienced. We have seen the extent to which structural change represents an extraordinary energy drain on those involved at every level of a public service. And this is exacerbated by the prior outsourcing experiences, and an English governance approach that is significantly hierarchical, managerialist and centralized. Thus, while the renationalization may have in large part been welcomed by most, staff experienced change being *done to them*, rather than agents enacting ground-up change—just as had occurred with the prior outsourcing process.

Second, we have demonstrated the need to interrogate conceptions of successful change. Our multi-layered research

design has enabled us to identify how change is experienced at different ‘speeds’ and ‘trajectories’, and is judged by different ‘measures of success’, meaning that formal milestones of change cannot be taken for granted. When a reform programme has ended, or when a change process even began, is an open question. Put in more concrete terms, in this case while the insourcing process that created the nationalized ‘Probation Service’ represented in one sense the end of a change programme, for many practitioners it represented merely one waypoint along a longer journey, if not the trigger for an even more intense period of processing and managing change (see Millings et al., 2023).

Third, we have observed the complex challenges for the (re-)legitimation of an insourced organization in its wider field. Our probation case shows that structural reforms can aid moral legitimacy: for example removing the perceived ‘taint’ of private sector involvement. And an organization may have cognitive legitimacy, being regarded as a taken-for-granted part of an organizational field. However, structural reform may not directly resolve and may even exacerbate the day-to-day performance of an organization, which relates to the pragmatic legitimacy of the organization for wider stakeholders.

Services in crisis?

Probation finds itself in an incredibly testing situation. It can reasonably be described as a ‘post-traumatic organization’ (Robinson, 2023), operating in what one of our respondents cast as a ‘change saturated area’ (national probation leader). And change is unceasing: a prisons capacity crisis has required emergency action over recent years, with significant knock-on effects for probation. The recent sentencing review (Ministry of, 2025) represented a further effort to avoid a calamitous collapse of the prison system, with the government response likely having significant negative ramifications for probation. Thus, while national leaders well recognize the extent to which a greater degree of stability and calm for practitioners is desperately needed, achieving this has not been open to them. Probation continues to be required to react to external pressures, rather than operating firmly as the author of its own destiny.

Probation’s difficulties speak to the broader significant challenges facing many public services in England and Wales. Informed commentators have identified ‘a crisis in public service outcomes’, a civil service ‘undermined, hollowed out’ and local authorities ‘effectively signalling bankruptcy’ (Mazzucato et al., 2024, p. 14). The Institute for Government has observed that, with the exception of schools, ‘the services on which the public relies are performing worse in 2024 than they were in 2010’ (Hoddinott et al., 2024, p. 4), hindered by widespread challenges including poor working conditions and recruitment/retention difficulties.

Towards mission point: fostering craft?

The reforms to which probation has been subject demonstrate the ability of an activist state to achieve extraordinary feats of organizational re-structuring, whether in the direction of outsourcing or insourcing. These are often facilitated by a governance approach favouring hierarchy, targets and considerable internal bureaucracy.

Michael Barber, a driving force behind New Labour's target-based public management mechanisms, has more recently recognized that at best, such approaches 'will get you from awful to adequate' levels of performance (Barber, 2017, p. 71). He goes on to suggest that to improve further, professionals must be afforded autonomy, mastery and purpose: the role of the centre should shift to one of active 'stewardship' (Barber, 2017, p. 92).

This speaks to a range of emergent 'mission'-oriented literatures, which has seen Mazzucato and colleagues, among others, arguing for a public management approach that affords public service professionals a considerable degree of autonomy, that sees governments 'lead with purpose, govern in partnership' (Mazzucato et al., 2024, p. 6) via an empowered networked coalition of stakeholders and professionals (Mazzucato et al., 2024, p. 39). In a similar vein, Honig (2024) has argued for the freeing of public servants from the tight constraints of bureaucratic processes: facilitating, rather, their cultivation of competence and development of connections with peers and purpose (Honig, 2024, Chapter 2).

We have observed, throughout our research project, a desire for greater freedoms and empowerment by many probation practitioners, in ways that resonate with these arguments. Indeed these constitute, from a probation perspective, a call to return to key elements of its historical self-understanding. In this vein, Burke et al. (2023) have argued that probation work must be community-based, co-located with other service providers, and draw on the skills and experience of individuals with lived experience (see Robinson et al., 2025). This perspective problematizes the form of insourcing pursued in England and Wales, which places it within what is regarded by many as a centralized and overly bureaucratized structure.

This speaks to Honig's (2024, p. 17) assertion that it is essential to draw out the 'mission point' of a relevant service, which may capture the ongoing work that practitioners are pursuing, or more likely the core work they wish they were enabled consistently to pursue. On this view, empowerment to pursue the craft of a given professional domain is essential. Practitioners need to feel trusted, with systems of assurance appropriately calibrated, and with bureaucratic and administrative systems that enable the relational work that most, if not all, would see being at the core of high-quality probation work (and, arguably, many other areas of public service).

This points, perhaps counter-intuitively, to the need for those interested in public management reform actively to resist thinking in terms of public management reform: to consider rather, what insights do we gain if we sit with the craft, the practice, at the core of a public service? What 'ground-up' sense of organizational mission emerges from this? With what implications for the strengths and limitations of particular governance structures and reforms therein? As one national probation leader observed, looking back on this period of significant structural change, probation is 'very defined by its sense of identity and sense of purpose. You cut into that, you hack at it, at your peril'. This is a lesson that those considering reforms in many other policy domains would do well to heed.

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