

Constrained voice and complicated loyalty: Understanding reasons to leave or stay working in the probation service

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Abstract

This article examines the complex reasons why staff choose to remain in or leave the Probation Service in England and Wales, using Hirschman's Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect (EVL-N) framework as an analytical lens. In the context of major systemic reforms, including the failed privatisation of services and subsequent reunification, the study explores the persistent staffing crisis and its impact on workforce morale, professional identity, and organisational commitment. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with probation staff across a regional case study, the findings highlight constrained voice, organisational dislocation, and heightened responsibilisation as key drivers of dissatisfaction. Many participants described intense workloads, emotional burnout, and limited professional autonomy, yet expressed strong loyalty, not to the organisation, but to a vocational ideal of probation work. This 'complicated loyalty' underscores a paradox: while it sustains workforce commitment, it may also mask systemic issues. The research also identifies muted or ineffective channels for staff voice, particularly post-reunification, exacerbated by the service's integration into the civil service. The article concludes that the EVL-N model offers a valuable framework for understanding public sector workforce dynamics and urges reforms that centre staff voice and well-being to improve retention and service delivery.

Keywords

Attrition, exit, loyalty, probation, voice, workforce

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Introduction

The Probation Service in England and Wales has undergone many years of upheaval marked by restructuring, and organisational uncertainty. From the controversial part-privatisation under the *Transforming Rehabilitation* programme in 2015 to the rapid reunification of services in 2021, probation staff have experienced continuous and often destabilising change. While the reunification was welcomed by many as a necessary corrective to the perceived failings of privatisation, it did not resolve the mounting staffing crisis that continues to affect morale, capacity, and service delivery. Amid rising workloads, staff shortages, and bureaucratic pressures, questions emerge not only about why staff choose to leave, but just as crucially, why they choose to stay.

This article uses Hirschman's (1970) *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (EVL) framework and its later adaptations, as a conceptual lens to explore these dynamics. At its core, Hirschman's model presents a typology of responses to organisational decline: *exit*, or withdrawal; *voice* or attempts to instigate change from within; and *loyalty*, the mediating force that shapes whether exit or voice is pursued.

The utility of the EVL model lies in its ability to illuminate the nuanced and sometimes contradictory behaviours of workers in strained systems. In applying it to the probation context, we advance a concept that is central to this study *complicated loyalty*. Rather than loyalty simply deferring exit or enabling voice, we find that many staff describe a deeper, more conflicted commitment: not to the organisation *per se*, but to a vocational ideal of probation work. This loyalty sustains their presence in the service even amid emotional burnout and disillusionment. It also reveals a paradox: while such loyalty preserves workforce stability in the short term, it may simultaneously obscure systemic dysfunction, enabling a culture of overwork and silence. This article draws on original empirical data gathered from interviews with probation staff in one of the newly formed probation regions. Through the voices of frontline practitioners, we explore how constrained voice, heightened responsibilisation, and a loyalty rooted in vocation shape decisions to stay or leave. In doing so, we contribute a more textured understanding of workforce retention and dissatisfaction in public service contexts under strain.

Background

There are approximately 240,000 people supervised by the Probation Service in England and Wales (a figure that is roughly three times the prison population on any given day) (Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service, 2025). The Probation Service employs frontline staff, including probation officers (POs) and probation service officers (PSOs) who work directly with people under supervision.¹ The original orientating mission of probation was to 'advise, assist and befriend' (Vanstone, 2004) and as such probation has traditionally been conceptualised as the rehabilitative arm of the criminal justice system (Garland, 1985). However, over recent decades there has been an increased focus on risk management and public protection alongside the advent of increased 'Taylorisation' and the introduction of New Public Management techniques (Kirton and Guillame, 2019; Tidmarsh, 2022). Its current operating role is encapsulated by the Service's strapline to: 'Assess, Protect and Change' (HMPPS, 2021).

Under *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms implemented by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2015, the probation service was divided into a public National Probation Service (NPS) and 21 privately run Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs). This large-scale privatisation also entailed a splitting of responsibility for the supervision of offenders based on their assessed levels of risk. The *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms were roundly criticised, both prior to and following implementation, with many questioning the rationale for bifurcating probation services based on the logic of risk (Robinson, 2016), and the underpinning neoliberalist rationale that opening probation to the 'market' would yield a promised 'rehabilitation revolution' (Deering and Feilzer, 2019; Kirton and Guillame, 2019).

Following the implementation of the reforms a series of reports from the National Audit Office (NAO, 2016, 2019) highlighted fundamental flaws in the contractual arrangements for the private providers, including systemic underfunding and an ill-suited Payment by Results mechanism, where the envisaged end-result (a reduction in recidivism) could not be attributable to any single provider within the required timescale (Albertson and Fox, 2019). More fundamentally, the NAO (2019) noted that the logic of privatisation does not work where a market cannot be allowed to fail, and where ultimately in such a situation the government would be required to step in to safeguard provision.

Following a swathe of negative critiques, and as the lifecycle of the first set of CRC contracts was coming to an end, the government announced that it intended to end outsourcing and re-unify probation services. In June 2021 probation services in England and Wales were officially re-unified. This 'in-sourcing' under an extremely tight timetable involved the transfer of 113,000 cases and more than 7,000 staff from 54 organisations, to join the existing complement of 3,500 probation officers in the NPS (Johal and Davies, 2022). The scale of this 'lift and shift', which also involved the migration of data and the transfer of 200 buildings alongside the reconfiguration of regional structures was unprecedented (Johal and Davies, 2022). The newly constituted service dropped the word 'National' from its title and simply became 'The Probation Service' (Millings et al., 2023).

Staff shortages have been one of the most significant challenges faced by the reconstituted Probation Service. While the reunification of services brought staff working in CRCs and the NPS under the umbrella of one national service, initially at least, creating the impression of an expanded workforce, the shortfall in staffing to meet service delivery requirements soon became apparent. The current picture shows that the number of probation officer and probation service officer full-time equivalent staff in post remains considerably short of the target required, as is the compliment of staff at other grades. A recent thematic inspection on the recruitment, training and retention of frontline probation staff shows that at probation officer grade there was a shortfall of 1,679 people in post (HMIP, 2025b).² This problem is exacerbated by the number of staff leaving. In the year covered in the thematic inspection, the rate of leavers at probation officer grades was 7.8% while at probation service officer grade it was 12.1% (HMIP, 2025b). This drain that has not been sufficiently stymied by a large-scale national campaign to recruit and train new officers.

The problems arising from insufficient staffing have been highlighted in a series of negative inspection reports since probation unification. These include excessively high

workloads, with knock-on effects on staff well-being and inadequate delivery of services (e.g. HMIP, 2025a). In a role with high levels of responsibilities involving significant emotional labour (Westaby et al., 2020), the demands are high. These burdens are further exacerbated by wider systemic challenges including increased pressure as a result of the prison over-crowding crisis. An early release scheme instituted in September 2024 included a requirement that people released under this scheme would be subject to supervision in the community at a time when many probation staff were already stretched beyond capacity (Carr, 2024).

These staffing challenges are not unique to the Probation Service. Research across the criminal justice system points to some common contributory factors. High stress environments, the challenging nature of the work, poor institutional supports, relatively poor remuneration, the impact of reputational damage (e.g. some of the recent high profile examples of policing malpractice) have all been documented (see *inter-alia*: Charman and Bennett, 2021; Tyson and Charman, 2023; Lambert et al., 2009). These challenges can also be set against a backdrop of the changing nature of work including increased labour flexibilization and the advent of 'portfolio careers' (Neely, 2020), eschewing the concept of a 'job for life', meaning people take up different jobs throughout their working lives. A recent report of the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection echoed some of these themes in its analysis of staffing across several criminal justice agencies (police, prosecution service, prisons and probation). The Joint Inspection observes that a pre-existing staffing crisis has been exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and notes that across all agencies:

... we find staff grappling with heightened pressures, from the point at which a crime is reported through to detention in overcrowded prisons. The strain experienced by those working in the system inevitably impacts morale, staff well-being and absenteeism. This not only affects the quality of work within the system but also erodes public confidence, impacting defendants, witnesses and victims alike. (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2024: 3)

The workforce crisis impacts those working within different agencies across the criminal justice system, as well as service delivery. Some common systemic issues have been identified, but a clearer understanding of staff motivations to both leave and to stay in their roles is required. Hirschman's (1970) Exit-Voice-Loyalty analytical framework provides a lens through which these dynamics can be explored. The following section provides an outline of this framework, before proceeding to discuss its application in research carried out with staff working in the Probation Service post-unification.

Exit-voice-loyalty

The EVL model developed by Albert Hirschman (1970) is a general theory that explains responses to dissatisfaction in different relational contexts. Since its development it has been applied in a range of settings. The original model proposes that when people face dissatisfaction, they will either *exit* (leave the relationship) or *voice* their dissatisfaction (seek to change the relationship from within). The decision to exit or voice, is mediated by the degree of *loyalty* the person feels towards the entity with whom/which they have

the relationship; in our case the loyalty an employee feels towards their employer (Hirschman, 1970). Applications of the EVL framework have further elaborated on the concept of loyalty. Dowding et al (2000) contend that the degree of loyalty depends on a person's identification with the 'object' of loyalty and the amount that someone has invested in this 'object':

We identify with something to the degree that it is tied with our personal history. We identify with objects to the extent that they form part of us. (Dowding et al., 2000: 477).

Furthermore, the relationship between voice and exit is context dependent and can be complex. For instance, if the possibility of exiting is relatively straightforward because alternative employment is available, then the motivation to exercise voice may be lessened. In such circumstances the exit options may 'atrophy the development of the art of voice' (Hirschman, 1970: 43). It may also silence dissent from within because those most likely to voice their concerns have left (Dowding et al., 2000). Of course, there are also other possibilities within the EVL framework. Individuals can, for example, choose to make a noisy exit.

In the original EVL framework, Hirschman (1970) argues that the main determinants besides loyalty of individuals and readiness to exit or voice are: (1) willingness to trade the certainty of exit for the uncertainties of improvement following voice, and (2) the estimate of their abilities to influence the organisation. Some other applications have tried to distinguish between individual and collective voice, the former referring to action to resolve what is perceived to be an individual concern, and the latter referring to more coordinated mobilisations by people with a shared set of concerns to affect change (Dowding et al., 2000), such as through trade union activity.

Concepts of silence and neglect have also been elaborated as important additions to the framework. As Hirschman (1970) proposed in his original formulation, exit by some may lead to atrophy of voice in others, resulting in a dynamic whereby people 'suffer in silence' (p.38). The dimension of neglect was added in later iterations (EVL-N) (Farrell, 1983); with neglect understood as 'a kind of internal exit or passivity in response to dissatisfaction' (John, 2017: 520). In this way silence and neglect can be understood as passive responses, in contrast to the more active responses of exit or voice.

There is some debate within the literature regarding the distinction between silence and voice (Ashford et al., 2009; Detert and Edmondson, 2011). A useful overview by Sherf et al. (2021) notes the conditions of psychological safety in which people may feel able to exercise voice or stay silent. Put simply, perceptions about the level of risk in speaking out (including a fear of censure and rejection) as well as the efficacy in doing so, impact people's ability and willingness to exercise voice in organisations. Some work has also explored links between silence 'the suppression of ideas and concerns', (Sherf et al., 2021: 137) burnout, and 'quiet quitting' (Burris et al., 2008).

The EVL-N model has been applied in research in a range of settings, although John (2017) notes that given its potential utility as an analytical framework, its application to public sector employment has been surprisingly limited. One notable exception is Mawby and Worrall's (2013) earlier research on probation occupational cultures which drew on aspects of the framework to explore staff motivation to stay in or leave the

probation service. In their research conducted prior to the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms Mawby and Worrall (2013) explored people's motivation for joining probation and their subsequent career trajectories. They developed a three-dimensional typology based on their sample. 'Lifers' were people who had worked in the service for a long period, having joined at a young age they remained for the course of their careers. 'Second careerists' were those who had joined the service from other professional backgrounds (including the armed forces, policing, health, and social work). 'Offender Managers' were more recent recruits from varied backgrounds 'for whom probation is one of a number of jobs they expect to have throughout their working lives' (Mawby and Worrall, 2013: 20).

In their analysis Mawby and Worrall (2013) drew on several concepts to explain probation workers' responses and adaptations to working within challenging environments. This included the challenge of working within the realm of 'imaginary penality' (Carlen, 2008), whereby the espoused rhetoric of the role did not match the reality of the job. To address this dissonance workers are required to act as if this rhetoric is reality. For some this can be too uncomfortable, meaning they experience profound dissatisfaction. Some chose to leave, while others find ways to navigate the ambiguity.

A striking feature of Mawby and Worrall's findings was the limited opportunities for voice both at the individual and collective level, and in particular the absence of a recognised 'voice' of probation to provide public representation and articulate issues of concern. They trace the diminished role of the probation union the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) and the impacts of probation being subsumed within the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) in 2004.³ Mawby and Worrall (2013) found limited evidence of neglect (i.e. failing to do aspects of the role, absenteeism etc.), but strikingly, despite the ongoing turbulence in the field, there were many examples of loyalty. However, interestingly, in their analysis they interpreted this as loyalty to the job of probation rather than loyalty to an organisation per se.

Current study

The research on which this article is based was undertaken as part of a wider study exploring the reconstitution of probation services following the decision to unify the public and private elements of probation delivery in England and Wales. The three-year project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council⁴ and it sought to explore a series of questions related to the challenges of reuniting a fractured workforce following a period of extensive reforms, the background of which has been outlined above. The overall project explored the challenges of reform and the service's attempts to build confidence or legitimisation from a range of perspectives, and includes a focus on local, regional and national levels. This involved interviews with probation staff, external stakeholders who work with the Probation Service, such as the judiciary and the police, and national senior policy makers. A core element of the project involved an in-depth study of experiences in one of the 12 newly constituted probation regions in England and Wales. The data for this article is based on the first phase of interviews with probation practitioners in the case study area, approximately 1 year post-unification.

The sample of participants who took part in this phase of interviews in the case study area comprised 56 probation staff working at different grades and roles within the region. Our sampling approach involved a selection of six Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) (the organisational units through which probation services are delivered), which reflected the diversity of the region. These included PDUs which had operated within the area footprints of two former CRCs, as well as sites which covered rural, urban, and suburban areas. The sample also included several staff working in various roles within the head office in the region. There was almost an equal split between staff who had worked in CRCs or the NPS prior to unification in June 2021 (n=26 and n=25 respectively). A smaller number of the sample had moved from the CRC to NPS prior to unification (n=3), while two remaining members of the sample had no prior experience of either CRCs or NPS, having joined the service after June 2021. The sample included staff working in a range of roles including senior management, PDU Leads, Senior Probation Officers, Probation Officers, and Probation Service Officers. Reflecting the gender composition of the service, more than three quarters of the sample were female. The length of service of staff within the sample ranged from 1 to 40 years with an average length of service of 13 years.

The research was subject to review by the HMPPS National Review Committee as well as university ethical approval. Information about the project was circulated via an event within the region, as well as through team meetings, e-mail communication with staff teams and snowball sampling. Written information about the project made it clear that participation was entirely voluntary and that the interviews were confidential, and that no identifying information would be included in material disseminated from the project. The interviews were conducted by five members of the research team. All the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The interviews were coded using a thematic coding frame that reflected the structure of the interview schedule, as well as additional over-arching themes that were generated by the research team following initial analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2024) This included themes of voice and loyalty, as well as respondents' perceptions as to why some of their colleagues had already decided to leave probation, and why they themselves were either contemplating departure or resolving to stay. In the following section we outline some of the themes raised in interviews, exploring these with reference to the EVL-N framework. Pseudonyms have been assigned to interview participants.

Should I stay or should I go?

As outlined above, the Probation Service has undergone a series of profound changes in the past decade. The employment situation of staff, as well as the nature of their work, has consequently changed. Following privatisation staff were divided into public sector work (in the NPS) or in the private sector (CRCs). The decisions about where staff were allocated was based on the composition of their caseload on a particular date. The initial decision to privatise probation was met with resistance by staff (Kirton and Guillame, 2019) and while the subsequent decision to unify services was broadly welcomed among all respondents in our sample, for some, it was also freighted with concerns about further disruption to their work lives and a sense of change fatigue. The extent to which

organisational change has become an almost constant feature of probation services within England and Wales can be traced through analysis by Robinson and Burnett (2007) following the establishment of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Some staff such as Dervla (a probation officer who had worked in the NPS prior to unification and had a long career within probation) and Beverly (a probation service officer who had variously worked in a Probation Trust and then a CRC), described feeling jaded by the experience of previous reforms. Others noted in sanguine terms that they had known nothing other than change and turbulence over the course of their careers. For some, however, the prospect of more restructuring was the final straw, and was directly linked to decisions to exit:

We were quite unfortunate, in my team, that our manager, who was with us through the CRC left, retired, at the point of unification. She felt she'd been through it already, she didn't want to, she was at that point where she thought, 'I'm not going through it again'. So, she decided to leave. (Jenny, PO)

The challenge of unmanageable workloads was another consistent theme. High workloads were compounded by significant staff shortages and created a 'domino effect' when staff took sick leave, meaning that other colleagues had to pick up their caseloads, thereby increasing the risk that they too would go off sick. Several respondents spoke about the effects of workload pressures on their own mental health and that of their colleagues – 'it's a real burnout culture' (Anna, PSO). The pressure to meet targets including completing assessments and paperwork on time was described by many as feeling overwhelming:

I was speaking to another member of staff last night. And she is sitting there doing an OASys [risk assessment] at nine o'clock at night. And she doesn't log off until maybe midnight or something. And it is still not done. (Gary, Case Administrator)

These pressures were cited as some of the reasons why people had taken time off on stress-related sick leave. Craig, a PSO who had been in post for 4 years described an unmanageable workload that had resulted in an extended period of sick leave:

I had maybe two months of being at 145 per cent, 150 per cent [on the workload tool] and you can't effectively manage risk when you are at that level . . . and I was really quite fortunate, I think, especially with a few cases, not to end up having an SFO [Serious Further Offence] really, because if you don't have the time to put in . . . you can't effectively manage someone.

Against the backdrop of these pressures, many staff like Craig, spoke about a sense of responsibilisation in the context of managing risk. In echoes of Kemshall's (1998) earlier analysis on where the locus of responsibility lies in the context of risk assessment, frontline staff experienced an individual burden to ensure that all case records were completed or to face the potential of being held responsible if a person on their caseload reoffended. The spectre of a Serious Further Offence (SFO) occurring on their caseload was a persistent anxiety voiced by respondents. SFOs are serious and violent and sexual offences committed by people on probation. The occurrence of an SFO leads to an automatic review of the

supervision of the case prior to the offence being committed. SFOs are relatively rare, constituting fewer than 0.5% of the probation caseload (HMIP, 2023); however, there have been some recent high profile SFOs where despite the issue of staff shortages being recognised as an important context, the practices of individuals have also been subject to scrutiny (HMIP, 2023). Throughout interviews, the issue of SFOs dominated. Anna, a PSO with a decade of experience, described an unrelenting pressure to 'hit targets' and keep records up to date, 'So if we have a serious further offence, we can defend ourselves effectively in those entries'. This concern was echoed by others:

My job just seems to be very focused on process, on paperwork, on arse-covering; that constant fear that if it all goes wrong, it's going to land on your doorstep. (Jane, PO)

Maria, a probation officer who had previously worked in the NPS, linked the departure of colleagues directly with these sorts of pressures, and the fear among staff of always feeling like they 'should have done more'. In this way she interpreted an organisational drive to maintain up-to-date records as being more about defensiveness – 'there's that added stress of almost like you're not going to get back- up from management because you've not ticked the boxes'—rather than where she felt her practice should be focused, i.e. working directly with people.

The combined burdens of unmanageable workloads alongside a sense of responsibility, were also linked to broader concerns regarding pay and conditions (Millings et al., 2023; Tidmarsh, 2024). Anna, a PSO, reflected on the levels of responsibility she held in contrast to her pay – 'you know, I'm only paid £24,000 a year and I'm getting these really, really serious clients . . . I know I can get paid effectively the same if not more stacking shelves at Lidl'. Similar concerns were echoed by others. For staff who had longer careers and had reached the top of the pay-scale, there was little incentive to stay, in a 'not well-paid job' (Richard, PO). Esme, a Senior Manager with two decades of experience, saw the direct impacts of relatively poor remuneration for the levels of responsibility that staff hold: 'Our pay isn't comparable with . . . local authorities, so the likes of housing officers, and who don't carry the level of risk that our staff carry'.

Constrained voice

It was evident that there were multiple pressures impacting on probation staff including experiences of change fatigue, intolerable workloads and comparatively poor pay and conditions, which were seen by many as contributing to a situation where some of their colleagues had already made the decision to exit the Probation Service, and where others were contemplating doing so. In interviews we also explored people's experiences of voice, the channels through which they were able to exercise voice, and their sense of efficacy in doing so. It was clear that the context of organisational restructuring and absorption into a larger national organisation – HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice—had led to a sense of dislocation from and movement away from levers of influence.

An increased distance from decision-makers was a consistent theme raised in interviews. To some extent staff recognised that this was a feature of now working for a much

larger centrally controlled organisation. Reference to 'the Centre' was deployed as short-hand by some to refer to where they perceived decision-making power to lie, and to encapsulate how they felt distant from it. Many staff who had previously worked for CRCs contrasted this with working in a smaller organisation, where they could more readily get in touch with senior managers compared with the current situation in the unified service. While the change for legacy NPS staff was not as profound, this distance and the reduced opportunity to have their voices heard was also tangible. Matt, a Senior Probation Officer who had worked in the NPS prior to unification and who had had a long career in probation, observed 'how distant the senior management group' felt from staff working on the ground, and how even under the previous structures 'there was a lot more contact with the chiefs'. Similarly, James, a Probation Officer who had worked in the NPS, remarked 'I feel I'm part of something bigger, but not necessarily in a good way . . . I feel, a lot of us, we're getting directives from who knows where. You can't relate to that so much'.

One of the effects of the reunification decision was that staff who had formerly worked in CRCs (7000 staff and approximately 62% of the probation workforce following unification) became civil servants overnight (Johal and Davies, 2022). For some this transition to the civil service was itself a signifier of a loss of professional autonomy. As such Jane, a probation officer with many years of experience questioned probation's place within the civil service:

Do we need to be in the civil service? Why can't we just go back to being Trusts.⁵ I don't understand why we are now . . . because we all know the civil service, it becomes almost this, like, process driven, there is no autonomy, there is no innovative, you know, practice.

More problematically, some found their new status as civil servants impeded their ability to voice criticisms of government policies such as the legacy of austerity and the cost-of-living crisis that were directly impacting the people with whom they worked. Danni who had previously worked in a CRC remarked 'we have a voice; I feel like we should be allowed to use it'. She went on to elaborate:

I don't agree with . . . like how are people on Universal Credit supposed to survive in this climate? And just the fact that it seems like they [the government] don't actually care about that. I do care about that. I think people shouldn't be going hungry in this country. We shouldn't have to be using food banks. (Danni, Probation Service Officer)

Linked to the view that with their status as civil servants, staff could not be publicly critical of government policy, there was also a sense of dissonance between some of the messaging at the highest political levels of 'the Centre' and the work that practitioners were carrying out on the ground. Some staff referred directly to wider punitive government policies such as proposals to increase the visibility of people undertaking unpaid work. For instance, Craig (PSO) described attending an online meeting which included a discussion with a Minister about unpaid work:

It was the first time I had ever seen him. I think he was talking about using jumpsuits . . . he seemed out of touch . . . he seemed to have little to no understanding of what had been going

on and what the actual problems were. It was a bit like taking your dog into the vets because it is ill, and then the vet puts a little hat on it and goes – ‘this might help’.

Concerns about voice and the capacity to exercise it were linked then to questions about professional autonomy and the sense in which the reforms to the Probation Service, which had increased centralised control and changed people’s employment status, had constrained this. Anna, a PSO, who had previously worked in a CRC reflected on a move to centrally driven targets and audit – ‘we used to get a degree of professional judgement’ – and the fact that she perceived there to be no pushback against these by her immediate managers; a feature she recognised was linked to everyone being overworked and facing similar pressures:

They don’t seem to be able to kind of push back whereas I’d say about five years ago, we’d all go down to a team meeting. And say, right, we’re all struggling with this. What are you going to do as managers to help us alleviate it? And they used to be able to say, Okay, we’ll give you an extension of 10 working days to do those tasks . . . And (now) it’s not communicated with us obviously, because you know, it’s a corporate decision, and they have no choice really, but when your managers aren’t able to make those defensible decisions against corporates, it makes you feel like you’ve got no line of defence really.

Jane, an experienced probation officer, similarly reflected on the increased demands placed on staff due to a proliferation of tasks, including in relation to parole assessments where probation officers were required to undertake an increasing number of tasks to meet centrally driven targets:

So, I’m just wondering what’s next, are we going to be cleaning the windows, the toilets? Because it almost feels as like you know when you go into a restaurant and the chef cooks the meal, the main event, we’re doing the waiting on, we’re doing the cleaning, it is absolutely overwhelming.

The role of unions as a means of exercising collective voice was rarely mentioned by staff in interviews, which in part may reflect a diminution in their perceived role and influence. This trend had already been observed in Mawby and Worrall’s (2013) earlier study. NAPO, the probation union and professional organisation, had resisted the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms, but its efforts to stave off privatisation, which included an abandoned judicial review, had been unsuccessful (Kirton and Guillame, 2019). Overall membership of the unions had declined, and this led Tom, a Probation Officer, to comment that he and other colleagues considered the unions not to be ‘very vocal’, something that he and colleagues were ‘sort of dismayed about’.

Muting the noise

In the context of manifold pressures and what for many were perceived as limited opportunities to exercise meaningful voice, some staff spoke of switching off from channels of communication in order to mute the polyphony of messages coming from multiple sources. In part this was a function of attempting to manage their workloads in order to

get the core tasks done. Many staff spoke of ‘information overload’ and feeling overwhelmed, a view encapsulated by James, a Probation Officer:

I think that’s one thing that I struggle with a little bit nowadays compared to the past was back in the day, you had your caseload, you could focus on that. Now, there’s Teams channels firing off information. You’re getting emails about this and that . . . I do find that that’s something that I’m struggling with a little bit at the moment is that sheer volume of information, and websites, and people getting in touch. (James, PO)

Others similarly described an increase in the volume of messaging ‘just this barrage that you have to sift through’ (Craig, PSO) or ‘death by e-mail’ (Maria, PO)—but also the sense in which there was little opportunity to influence the direction of travel:

I think it feels increasingly that we’re just a cipher almost for the messaging and we really don’t have an awful lot of influence on . . . Certainly, we have no influence on the ‘what’. We may have some influence on the ‘how’ . . . it does feel increasingly like this is just stuff that’s happening. (Matt, SPO)

On top of heavy (and in many cases unmanageable) workloads, some people coped with this by muting communication channels:

We’re supposed to dial in [to Teams meetings], a lot of people don’t bother I don’t think . . . I think people are switched off to a point really. (Matt, SPO)

While to some extent this ‘switching off’ could be viewed through the Hirschman model as a form of silence or neglect i.e. ‘a kind of internal exit or passivity in response to dissatisfaction’ (John, 2017: 520)—it was also evidently deployed as a coping mechanism by staff who were feeling overwhelmed and for whom communication (or voice) felt like a one-way street.

Complicated loyalty

A fundamental tenet of the EVL-N conceptual framework is that people’s decision to leave an organisation and/or exercise their voice to effect change is mediated by their sense of loyalty. The preceding sections have provided illustrations of people’s accounts of exit and voice and aspects of neglect or ‘muting messages’ as a form of coping with work demands. This section explores how both the framing of probation work as a vocation and as work that involves tenacity and a belief in the capacity for change complicates understandings of loyalty to an employer or organisation.

A striking feature in many accounts was the extent to which staff described their loyalty to an ‘ideal’ of probation work or a sense of ‘vocation’ rather than to any particular iteration of the organisation, a point reported also in Mawby and Worrall’s study (see also: Robinson et al., 2025). Some of the staff interviewed spoke about how working with people in difficult circumstances (or indeed working with difficult people), was a vocation: that is, a role for which they were suited and from which they derived meaning. Beverly, a probation officer who been in post for seven years, explained her and her colleagues’ commitment to their job:

They're [my colleagues] there because they actually believe in the work that they're doing, and they want to help to protect victims. They see the importance in that. To be honest, that's why I chose to remain in the service, not venture out of the service.

This vocational perspective accords with Dik and Duffy's (2009: 428) definition:

A vocation is an approach to a particular life role that is oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation.

Some staff such as Jane, a Probation Officer, explicitly invoked the term vocation to describe her work – 'It's a vocation. It's similar to nursing, you're giving it your all'. In Jane's account this 'giving it your all' entailed 'emotional labour' from which 'you don't switch off'. James similarly described a job that was 'all encompassing':

There is that much emotional baggage, you get that involved with cases that I think you can't help have some loyalty. (James, Probation Officer).

James describes loyalty that is not directed towards an organisation or an employer but towards the 'cases', i.e. the people that he was working with. Alison, a probation officer who had been in role for over a decade, similarly described a sense of vocation and directly related this to the fact that she had not yet left the Probation Service, despite seeing others doing so:

My friend was telling me, you know, he's on more or less the same money as me, he gets weekends free. He never works an evening. When he is on leave, he's on leave. And I think, 'Why don't I want that for myself?' but equally I wouldn't have there's something there in terms of the work that we do with the client group that we've got, especially a client group that is often forgotten by society, that you feel compelled to want to continue. It feels like a duty and a service to- I know it sounds really cheesy, but it does feel like it's a vocation almost to try and . . . that's where your loyalty lies, I suppose.

Other staff linked their continued commitment to working in probation, despite acknowledged detriment to their own well-being, to their identity as a probation worker. Carol, for instance had worked for over 20 years in probation and spoke about the impact of excessive work pressures on her mental health:

The volume of work is enormous. I'm quite a positive person but even if I have my limits. It's been incredibly stressful. I've struggled hugely, and I know some of my colleagues have because I could literally sit here every hour of every day and never get it all done.

Despite acknowledging the impact on her well-being, Carol also framed her continued commitment as something 'probation officers always do', and 'what we are at heart . . . we get on with it'. This sense of 'getting on with it' was echoed across numerous accounts, even where respondents were quite clearly struggling with excessive pressures:

It was really hard, it really impacted on me mentally. The stress levels, everything that was there. There were times I nearly went off . . . stupidly, I stayed in work. (Diane, Probation Officer)

While, on one hand, this could be interpreted as a form of ‘loyalty’, it is clearly a complicated loyalty. Some people appeared to rationalise working excessive hours, and impingement on their personal lives (Westaby et al., 2016), in terms of loyalty to the people with whom they worked and/or the idea of what probation workers ‘always do’. Many respondents described their enduring commitment to the work they were doing, but this was often caveated with the recognition of the negative impacts on their lives. There are evident detriments to relying on this framing of loyalty for individual well-being, and for staff retention in the longer term.

Discussion and conclusion

The recruitment and retention of staff across agencies in the criminal justice, including in the Probation Service is an area of critical concern. Understanding the reasons people leave and stay in employment is therefore important. Hirschman’s EVL-N model and its later adaptations provide a useful analytical lens through which to consider these issues. Drawing on the narratives of staff working on the frontline of the Probation Service, the findings presented demonstrate that the EVL-N model has analytical purchase in helping to explore the explanations that people give for why they stay or remain in this work.

As the preceding sections have illustrated, there are numerous reasons why people have left or are contemplating leaving the Probation Service. These include wider structural factors, including relentless iterations of significant organisational reforms. While the decision to unify probation services, was universally welcomed (Annison et al., 2023; Millings et al., 2023), the initial privatisation decision and its subsequent reversal have left staff with a sense of reform fatigue. On top of this, staff described dissatisfaction with their pay and conditions. Respondents highlighted the relatively poor remuneration for their work, particularly in the context of very high burdens of responsibilities. Some decisions to leave were prompted by comparisons with work in other sectors where the level of responsibility was perceived to be much more minimal.

Increased responsibilisation was accentuated by a sense of diminished autonomy. Probation staff recounted pressures to make sure boxes were ticked to meet centralised targets and to avoid the calamity of being held accountable for ‘missing something’ if a serious further offence occurred on their caseload. In this context staff described practices which were driven by defensiveness and a diminution of what they considered to be their core role – the time afforded to work directly with people subject to supervision. These findings resonate with previous research on the changing nature of probation practice, which have reported staff dissatisfaction with increased bureaucratisation and administrative burdens (see, for example, Deering, 2011; Grant, 2016; Millings et al., 2023, 2025; Tidmarsh, 2022); and this phenomenon was also reported in Mawby and Worrall’s (2013) study. However, these processes appear to have been further accelerated within the increasingly centralised and top-down structures of the nationalised Probation Service, where central targets filter down to staff on the ground, who have little input into shaping these policy and organisational priorities.

Such experiences are exemplified by the Senior Probation Officer quoted above who remarked ‘we have no influence on the *what*’. The ability to ‘influence the *what*’ speaks

to the scope for professional autonomy as well as questions of voice. Within an increasingly hierarchical and centralised organisational model which embedment in the HMPPS organisational structure exemplified, the space for professional autonomy and the capacity to articulate voice has been further constrained. This was evident in the increased distance between staff working in probation regions and the perceived levers of power at the 'centre'. Moreover, many staff viewed their status as civil servants as a further impediment on professional autonomy and voice. For some this status was viewed as stifling their ability to be critical of policies and practices to which they objected, including in areas which directly impacted the people with whom they were working.

As outlined, Hirschman's (1970) model and its later adaptations proposes that loyalty acts as an important mediating variable impacting decisions to exit, voice or engage in neglect or disengagement. In this research, and perhaps reflective of the multiple changes in organisational structures, staff typically did not reference loyalty to their employer but spoke more broadly about loyalty to the people they worked with, the idea of probation work or 'a vocation'. Loyalty is commonly viewed as a good. Employers value loyal workers, states valorise loyal citizens, retailers promote loyalty cards to their consumers. Conversely disloyalty is widely as a negative attribute. Many respondents framed their loyalty in positive terms in that it sustained their commitment in spite of the manifold pressures described above. However, we caution against a straightforward positive reading.

While loyalty to a vocation or an idea of probation work, as this research demonstrates, may motivate people to remain in employment, it may also be a double-edged sword, particularly in the context where the espoused ideal does not match the reality. To this extent, our research finds echoes with the 'imaginary penalties' (Carlen, 2008), outlined in Mawby and Worrall's (2013) study. For some of the staff in our research what they imagined the work to be, was not something they were enabled to do. Further still, some accounts provided were often framed in a way that recognised the detriment of this commitment to their own well-being. Kim et al. (2020) propose the term 'passion exploitation' to refer to the ways in which people who care deeply about their work may be subject to exploitation, through for instance being pushed beyond their capacities. This is also linked to staff burnout (Kim et al., 2020).

In many participants' accounts we found evidence of a complicated loyalty. This was seen in narratives which rationalised excessive working hours and 'getting on with it' as something probation staff do. Some framed this in terms of a vocation, as something necessary to meet the needs of the people they worked with and/or as a means to stave off anxieties. Staff described spillover into their home lives which echoes earlier research (Westaby et al., 2016), but which now appear even more excessive in the context of an over-stretched service struggling to meet the workload demands placed upon it. These structural challenges have been laid bare in numerous inspection reports post-unification (HMIP, 2025a), as well as in submissions to the recent Independent Sentencing Review (2025) where the gaps between aspirations for service delivery and available resources are clear.

To conclude, we find that the EVL-N model has analytical purchase in the context of probation work, and by extension to other aspects of criminal justice and public sector work. While efforts to recruit new staff to the probation continue apace, our findings suggest the need for a sustained focus on staff well-being and retention. If the challenges

of workforce issues are to be meaningfully addressed, it makes sense to apply a framework that helps to understand these issues from staff perspectives and which can help explore diverse motivations for leaving, staying, exercising voice or silently quitting.

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Ethical Considerations

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Consent to Participate

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Data availability statement

The anonymised data set for this project will be deposited with the UK Data Service in 2025.

Notes

1. Key grades in the Probation Service include band 3 probation services officers, band 4 probation officers (collectively known as probation practitioners), as well as band 5 senior probation officers (HMPPS, 2024).
2. The report documents that on 30th September 2024 there were 5,436 probation officer full-time equivalent staff in post, while the target number is 7,115.
3. Guillaume and Kirton's (2020) study of NAPO following the introduction of the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms points to some of the challenges for union membership and representation within a fractured organisation.
4. Rehabilitating Probation: Rebuilding culture, identity and legitimacy in a reformed public service. ESRC Project Reference (ES/W001101/1)

5. Probation Trusts were the organisational structures that pre-dated the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms. These reforms swept away 35 public sector probation Trusts and replaced them with the two-tier NPS/CRC structures.

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