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Policing the partnership: structural change, organisational legitimacy and police evaluations of probation in public protection

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how police actors perceive the probation service in the wake of its outsourcing and reunification during a decade of profound structural reform, offering a unique perspective on multi-agency collaboration within criminal justice. Drawing on interviews with senior leaders, frontline officers and staff immersed within partnership arrangements, the study examines how probation's organisational legitimacy is evaluated from outside. Using the conceptual lens of organisational legitimacy, we reveal how legitimacy is experienced as transitional – shaped by professional encounters and institutional memory. Participants frequently described probation as a service in crisis, citing operational instability and diminished capacity as barriers to effective collaboration. Yet these critiques were tempered by reflections on probation's enduring moral legitimacy, grounded in shared values and long-standing relationships. The failed Transforming Rehabilitation reforms of probation services emerged as a cautionary tale, sharpening police awareness of the fragility of interagency partnerships and fuelling anxieties about the marketisation of criminal justice. Despite concerns, many expressed cautious optimism about the reunification of probation services and reaffirmed their belief in public service collaboration as essential to public protection. This paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how legitimacy is co-constructed across organisational boundaries and how police perceptions illuminate the relational dynamics underpinning effective multi-agency work in criminal justice.

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Introduction

The past decade has posed exceptional challenges for the probation service in England and Wales. The Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) programme, introduced in 2014, radically restructured the service by dividing its functions and outsourcing around 70% of its workload and workforce to a mixed economy of providers. This model was later deemed 'irredeemably flawed' by HM Inspectorate of Probation (2019), as evidence mounted that the reforms were ineffective and service delivery

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would deteriorate without intervention (Millings et al. 2023, Annison et al. 2024). In 2021, the government reversed course, reunifying probation within the public sector.

While the impact of these reforms on probation staff is well documented (Millings et al. 2023, 2025, HMIP 2025), far less attention has been paid to how key partners – particularly policing – experienced collaboration during these structural shifts. This paper addresses that gap by, uniquely, examining reflections from policing actors, including operational leaders, officers, Police and Crime Commissioners, and their staff, on how reforms shaped relationships with probation, confidence in joint working, and the capacity to deliver effective multi-agency criminal justice outcomes. Framing these perspectives through the lens of organisational legitimacy (Suchman 1995), the paper makes two contributions.

First, viewing legitimacy as fluid – something that is gained or lost – illuminates how trust and confidence in a criminal justice partner are negotiated over time. Our analysis identifies conditions under which confidence in probation can be rebuilt and whether legitimacy loss is temporary or enduring. Police narratives reveal tensions between official messaging prior to reunification – portraying probation as weakened and in need of reform (Ministry of Justice 2018) – and lived experiences of collaboration. These tensions are most evident in contrasts between seasoned leaders, who draw on long histories of partnership and express empathy, and newer officers, whose limited exposure to a stable probation service fosters scepticism. Suchman's (1995) dimensions of pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy provide a framework for understanding these layered negotiations.

Second, the analysis underscores that policy reform occurs within a broader institutional ecosystem of interdependent agencies. The story of probation's outsourcing and subsequent insourcing – through TR and Unification – reflects police participants' sense of belonging within the criminal justice organisational field. Structural changes introduced practical and logistical challenges to inter-agency collaboration that persist today. Yet, in their critique of the mixed economy model's impact on probation and on multi-agency work, police voices most clearly articulate principles they view as essential for effective public protection. Perceptions of diminished authenticity and effectiveness during outsourcing, contrasted with reassurance following reunification, frame TR as a cautionary tale. For police participants, this period exemplifies the fragility of multi-agency cooperation. Observing disrupted practices and a loss of focus among probation colleagues, they draw parallels to their own organisational context, reinforcing anxieties about the marketisation of policing (Loader et al. 2014, White 2015).

The paper begins by outlining joint working arrangements between police and probation in England and Wales, followed by an overview of the two major structural reforms probation has undergone. It then introduces Suchman's (1995) framework of organisational legitimacy before detailing the methodology used to generate the data. The core analysis examines interviews with police leaders and practitioners to explore perceptions of probation's legitimacy post-reunification. The discussion reflects on how structural reforms have threatened the integrity of multi-agency working and the organisational alliance that police professionals believe they share – and wish to preserve – with probation counterparts.

Police and probation: an evolving public protection organisational alliance

Since the publication of the Morgan Report (1991), which advocated for a multi-agency approach to community safety, police and probation services in England and Wales have developed increasingly integrated working relationships. This trajectory was formalised through the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which established Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) and placed a statutory duty on 'responsible authorities' – notably police and probation – to collaborate on local strategies to reduce crime, disorder and antisocial behaviour. With over 300 CSPs operating nationally, the principle that no single agency can address the root causes of crime in isolation became embedded in local governance structures.

These collaborative arrangements deepened with the introduction of targeted statutory mechanisms. The establishment of Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) in 2001 mandated joint working to manage individuals assessed as posing significant harm. This was followed by the evolution of the Prolific and Persistent Offender Programme into the wider rollout of Integrated Offender Management (IOM) units in 2009, which further institutionalised coordinated efforts among police, probation and other partners to manage high-priority offenders. Together, these developments reflect a sustained policy commitment to conceptualising ‘public protection’ as integrated, multi-agency practice – requiring police, probation and prison services to collaborate in assessing and managing the risks posed by dangerous sexual and violent offenders in the community.

For probation services – historically rooted in values of care, rehabilitation and support for vulnerable individuals (Dominey and Canton 2022) – this shift towards formalised, risk-oriented partnership working has not been without tension. The increasing emphasis on public protection has reshaped the service’s professional identity. Alongside broader shifts from social work to community punishment, managerialist reforms have recalibrated probation’s operational role, embedding joint supervision practices and performance metrics (Nash 2008). The observed consequences have included the subordination of rehabilitative aims to risk management imperatives (Millie and Erol 2006), the fragmentation of the supervised individual into a series of data points shared across agencies (Fitzgibbon and Lea 2010), and the prioritisation of institutional accountability over individual welfare (Fitzgibbon 2007).

Early evaluations of MAPPA and IOM highlighted both the potential and the pitfalls of these partnerships. Kemshall and Maguire (2001) noted the emergence of closer police – probation ties, while Nash (2008) cautioned against the ‘policification’ of probation, where enforcement and control began to dominate. His concept of the ‘polibation officer’ captured the blurring of professional boundaries, as probation staff adapted to crime-focused objectives and police officers assumed more active roles in offender management (Nash 2014).

However, not all accounts were as anxious about the consequences of inter-agency working. Mawby and Worrall (2004, 2011) acknowledged longstanding tensions between the two services but also identified a growing willingness to collaborate by the late 1990s. Their research on Prolific Offender Projects – the precursor to IOM – highlighted mutual learning and professional respect. Police managers valued probation’s relational and rehabilitative expertise, while probation staff recognised the benefits of improved information sharing and operational coordination. Nonetheless, concerns about ‘mission distortion’ (Corbett 1998) persisted, with scholars warning (see Nash 2014) that the pursuit of shared goals could dilute distinct agency identities. Maintaining cultural integrity through open communication and mutual respect was seen as essential to sustaining effective collaboration.

In recent years, strategic alignment between police and probation has intensified. In 2022 the Home Secretary’s pledge to ‘cement’ the role of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in offender management signalled a further institutionalisation of joint working. A statutory duty to formalise collaboration between PCCs and probation was framed as essential to enabling PCCs to shape local criminal justice systems (Patel 2022). The Review of the PCC model in 2022 found strong support among PCCs and Regional Probation Directors (RPDs) for enhanced cooperation, particularly in relation to IOM, MAPPA and Community Payback (APCC 2023, Home Office 2023).

Although collaboration between police and probation services is not new, the scale, depth and institutional embeddedness of these partnerships have expanded considerably. Over the past two decades, both partners have had to navigate the impact of austerity measures in reducing funding and increased exposure to political pressure in ways that have made securing legitimacy challenging (Crawford and Cunningham, 2015). From national policy forums to local delivery mechanisms, the imperative for integrated working has never been more pronounced. Whether through statutory obligations, such as the Serious Violence Duty,¹ or through organically developed local arrangements, both services now operate as leading agencies within a shared public protection

alliance (Robinson 2021). Understanding the evolving dynamics of this relationship, and how structural changes within one agency reverberate across the partnership landscape, is essential to grasping the present and future contours of public protection.

A decade of probation reform

In June 2021, probation services in England and Wales were formally reunified within the public sector, marking a significant policy reversal from the part-privatisation and marketisation introduced under the *Transforming Rehabilitation* (TR) reforms of 2014 (Annisson et al. 2024). These TR reforms brought about significant structural changes, dividing service delivery between 21 private-sector Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs), responsible for low- and medium-risk offenders, and a newly created public-sector National Probation Service (NPS), tasked with managing high-risk cases and court services (Robinson et al. 2016). The concerns many had voiced about the speed, scope and reach of the TR reform programme were quickly validated as compelling evidence from a variety of sources indicated concerns with the sustainability of the devolved arrangements. The Chief Inspector of Probation described it as ‘irredeemably flawed’ (HMIP 2019, p. 3), and the National Audit Office highlighted serious contractual failings and chronic underfunding (Albertson and Fox 2019). A Justice Select Committee inquiry further exposed the negative impact on staff, victims and the confidence of criminal justice partners. In response, the government took the unprecedented step of terminating CRC contracts early and reunifying the service into a structure of 12 regions across England and Wales (Millings et al. 2023).

This decade of reform has created three distinct phases in the organisational landscape shared by police and probation services. Whilst the 43 police constabularies of England and Wales remained unchanged, the pre-TR phase featured 35 locally governed Probation Trusts, many of which were aligned with police force areas. The TR phase (2014–2021) introduced a fragmented model of 21 CRCs and an NPS divided into seven areas. Since 2021, the post-TR phase has seen a renationalised service structured into 12 relatively large regions, each typically covering multiple police force areas. Many police leaders and practitioners in our sample have worked across all three phases, witnessing first-hand the shifting structures, boundaries and workforce of probation services.

The scale and pace of these changes, coupled with the impacts of the pandemic, have led to the characterisation of probation as a ‘post-traumatic service’ (Robinson 2022, p. 264). Annual reports from HM Inspectorate of Probation since reunification have consistently highlighted the strain on staff, with high workloads and persistent shortages undermining service delivery – pressures exacerbated by ongoing structural upheaval (HMIP 2023). These reports reflect the difficult realities faced by frontline practitioners and reinforce a broader sense of institutional vulnerability (Millings et al. 2025).

Against this backdrop, the government’s stated aim to ‘build confidence’ through reunification (Ministry of Justice 2018) has taken on added significance. While the language of ‘strengthening’ the service acknowledges the reputational damage inflicted by TR, it also underscores the challenge of restoring legitimacy and credibility within the wider criminal justice field. As Robinson (2022) has argued, the unified probation service must navigate the complex task of re-establishing its standing among partners, including the police, where the lasting impact of the TR reform programme looms large.

A conceptual framework for understanding perceptions of organisational legitimacy

Within a criminological – and especially a policing – context, considerations of legitimacy have primarily focused on the dynamic and interactive exchanges between powerholders and the publics they serve (Bottoms and Tankebe 2012, p. 168). This body of scholarship primarily seeks to understand how criminal justice institutions can foster public trust and confidence in their exercise of

power, through their behaviour and conduct. The argument follows that legitimate criminal justice institutions, judged normatively by their publics, encourage voluntary cooperation and self-motivated compliance. Where most people feel stimulated to obey laws most of the time because it is 'the right thing to do', rather than reliance on the fear of sanction secure instrumental compliance, and people's reasons for law-breaking are based on self-interested calculation (Jackson et al. 2012, p. 30). Moreover, Tankebe (2019) argues that the capacity of practitioners, as power holders and organisational partners, to secure 'audience legitimacy' intrinsically shapes their own sense of individual and collective self-legitimacy.

In analysing police assessments of working with probation services, as they have experienced two periods of profound structural reform, there are several reasons why applying this same logic in negotiating (organisational) legitimacy is attractive. In its most basic form – aligning with dialogues of audience legitimacy – organisational legitimacy is the process 'whereby an organisation justifies to a peer or subordinate its right to exist' (Maurer 1971, p. 361). It is not enough that an organisation passively exists, but that when it is subjected to scrutiny, it is seen to have value and purpose to those that may seek to work alongside the organisation (Suchman 1995). When an organisation is seen to lack legitimacy in the eyes of those who engage with it, they are 'more vulnerable to claims that they are negligent, irrational, or unnecessary' (Meyer and Rowan 1977, p. 350), and, by extension, that their place in a social environment (or organisational alliance) is threatened, or at worst, they are reduced to being illegitimate.

Legitimacy, from this perspective, is not 'a thing' comprised of essential properties, but a communicative process constructed in acts of meaning negotiation (Suddaby et al. 2017). Conceptually, legitimacy is elastic enough to recognise that while alignment between an organisation's attributes and its social and cultural environment is appealing, neither the organisation nor its operating context is inherently stable (Suddaby et al. 2017). Instead, Suchman (1995, p. 583) argues, there is a need to constantly separate and distinguish the focus on the actions of the organisations from the nuanced focus on the essence of said organisation. By dynamically contrasting an organisation's behaviour with perceptions of its character, we can better illuminate the temporal texture of legitimation – where shifts in legitimacy may be fleeting or episodic, or alternatively, enduring and long-lasting. In the case of probation unification, Ministers articulated that this was a needed change to (re)build partner confidence in the organisation. There was a legitimacy deficit that needed to be repaired. The policy reversal that followed can be viewed as an example of what Suchman (1995, p. 598) calls a 'normalizing account' where a narrative is constructed to help neutralise a breach of legitimacy (Robinson 2021). The efforts of policy makers, in setting a course for the reunification of probation services encapsulated the sense of trying to recover from a policy failure and to slow, and ideally stop, a sense of crisis in the sector (see Annison et al. 2024).

Suchman's (1995) influential framework outlines three progressively deeper forms of legitimacy that organisations seek to secure in their efforts to maintain or restore positive evaluations from their audiences. The first, *pragmatic legitimacy*, is grounded in the instrumental value an organisation provides to its most immediate stakeholders – those who assess its actions based on self-interest and expected benefits. The second, *moral legitimacy*, arises when external audiences perceive the organisation's conduct and values as ethically appropriate within their socially constructed value systems. The third and most embedded form, *cognitive legitimacy*, occurs when an organisation's existence and activities are taken for granted – seen as natural, inevitable and beyond question. At this stage, alternatives become unthinkable, and the organisation is perceived as an unassailable part of the institutional landscape.

Suchman's model, originally developed through corporate case studies in competitive markets, requires some adaptation when applied to the statutory, interdependent relationships between police and probation services that are our focus here. Nonetheless, his notions of *pragmatic* and *moral* legitimacy are particularly useful for analysing the everyday, interpersonal dynamics that shape partner confidence. These forms of legitimacy help illuminate the critical role probation practitioners and managers play as they 'present the face of probation' (Robinson 2021, p. 161). The

judgements made by police partners – regarding the integrity, professionalism and decision-making capacity of probation staff – offer insight into how legitimacy is actively constructed, contested and potentially lost.

The conceptualisation of *cognitive* legitimacy, meanwhile, allows us to move beyond individual interactions to consider how legitimacy is shaped at the level of the broader partnership field. Robinson (2021, p. 160) describes the ‘relational space’ in which the newly unified probation service must rebuild its reputation post-TR as an organisational field spanning local, regional and national domains and populated by a growing array of stakeholders. Within this space, police actors are not only evaluating probation as a partner but also reflecting on their own – and their organisation’s – position within this complex, multi-layered alliance.

In the analysis that follows, we examine police perceptions of organisational legitimacy of the probation service – three years after reunification. Drawing on Suchman’s (1995) tripartite model of organisational legitimacy – pragmatic, moral and cognitive – we explore how police leaders and practitioners reflect on their experiences of working with probation across a decade of reform.

Methods

Between 2022 and 2025, the *Rehabilitating Probation*² research team conducted 340 interviews to examine the experiences and consequences of the June 2021 unification of probation services in England and Wales. Following institutional ethical approval³ and access granted by the Ministry of Justice’s National Research Committee, the study generated multi-level insights – national, regional and local – both within probation and across the wider criminal justice landscape, enabling a nuanced assessment of the reform’s reach and impact.

The study’s core focus was a single case study probation region, where three waves of interviews were conducted with probation managers and staff. Typical of the 12 Probation Service regions, the case study area is geographically diverse, encompassing major metropolitan centres, smaller towns and rural communities. It includes two Violence Reduction Units, established due to high levels of serious violence and several local authorities rank amongst the most deprived nationally based on Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government data.⁴ In addition to internal probation perspectives, the study captured views from partner organisations – including the prison service, judiciary, youth services, local authorities and police – to explore experiences of working with an agency undergoing sustained structural transformation. These were complemented by interviews with senior policymakers and Regional Probation Directors across all 12 regions to capture perspectives on reform implementation.

While multi-agency work in public protection has grown to involve numerous organisations, this article focuses specifically on interviews with police figures (n = 22) to examine how lessons from our conceptual framework apply to the relationship between two major criminal justice partners. Our case study region spans multiple police force areas and the sample includes Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and senior staff (n = 4), Chief Officer group members (n = 4) and operational officers engaged in routine multi-agency practice (n = 10). To incorporate a national perspective, we also interviewed PCCs and Chief Officers (n = 4) with portfolio responsibilities for the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs’ Council in areas such as Criminal Justice, IOM and MAPPA. Participants reported between 2 and 30 years of experience working with probation (mean: 14 years), with collaboration as central to their role being a key inclusion criterion. While this positions them to offer informed insights, it also means they are embedded within the same collaborative networks as the probation partners they evaluate.

Interviews were conducted between June 2022 and February 2024 to reflect the study’s conceptualisation of organisational change as iterative and ongoing. Staging interviews across this period enabled us to capture evolving perceptions two and three years post-unification. Semi-structured interview schedules encouraged participants to reflect on professional relationships with probation over time, identify specific multi-agency arrangements, assess the form and effectiveness of joint

working, and consider probation's contribution to partnership practice. These narrative accounts provided a foundation for exploring legitimacy as a communicative and co-constructed process – both shaped by and shaping inter-organisational exchange as participants narrate in their own words how their partnership working with probation has been experienced (Suddaby et al. 2017). Informed by Suchman's framework, our approach examined not only the nature and quality of police–probation relationships but also their perceived impact on the broader delivery of multi-agency criminal justice working.

Each interview lasted between 40 and 110 minutes, was professionally transcribed, anonymised, and pseudonyms were applied throughout. Force areas are not disclosed to preserve confidentiality, although job roles are indicated. 45% of our sample is female, 55% is male.

Thematic analysis was conducted by the lead author using NVivo, following an inductive coding approach. Analysis focused on participants' assessments of working relationships, perceptions of probation's contribution to multi-agency practice and observed changes in operational delivery. This approach enabled exploration of the dynamic and negotiated nature of legitimacy within the organisational field of public protection (Hoefler and Green 2016).

Pragmatic legitimacy and interagency strain: everyday challenges for police in collaborating with a probation service in crisis

According to Suchman (1995), the most fundamental form of organisational legitimacy – *pragmatic legitimacy* – is secured when a partner is perceived to contribute value within a dynamic exchange. It is built when audiences judge an organisation's ability to meet their needs positively and make self-interested calculations about the benefits of collaboration. In analysing police accounts of the everyday realities of multi-agency working, it becomes clear that successive structural reforms have significantly constrained probation's ability to secure this form of legitimacy. Despite a widespread empathy for probation colleagues operating under intense staffing and workload pressures, police participants consistently voiced concern about the quality and reliability of partnership arrangements. Three dominant themes emerged from their reflections: concerns about the visibility and representation of probation services; the impact of perceived crisis on operational resilience; and the lingering effects of organisational fragmentation following Transforming Rehabilitation (TR). Together, these themes illustrate how probation is struggling to (re)establish pragmatic legitimacy in the eyes of its police partners.

All participants acknowledged that collaborative working between police and probation is inherently complex – often 'unavoidably messy' (Ann, PCC Chief Executive). They recognised the challenges of sharing intelligence, navigating disagreements about individuals being jointly managed, and reconciling differing organisational priorities. There was also a shared understanding of the difficulty of jointly supervising some of the most volatile individuals in the community. Police and probation were seen to operate with mutual respect and a shared commitment to public protection. However, both strategic and operational participants offered nuanced commentaries that contrasted positive assessments of individual probation professionals with more critical views of the probation organisation itself – particularly its visibility and coherence within multi-agency arrangements.

At the strategic level, longstanding concerns about the alignment of probation boundaries with police and Local Authority areas were seen to have intensified over the past decade. Senior police leaders, including PCCs and Chief Constables, described the shifting geography of probation – where, since 2014, probation boundaries have been both smaller and now larger than police force areas – as a barrier to effective collaboration. These changes complicated efforts to identify direct counterparts, pursue co-commissioning opportunities and develop coherent local priorities. The visibility and engagement of probation leaders were seen as crucial in bridging these gaps. While police leaders expressed sympathy for probation managers tasked with helping partners navigate the service's latest iteration, their reflections also revealed frustration. The perceived lack of

clarity and consistency in probation's organisational presence was viewed as a significant obstacle to building and sustaining effective partnership working:

it's tricky to understand probation and that's been magnified by big change programmes – [I'd get people say] "I just want to introduce myself. I am the new such and such." And you think, "where does that fit? are you that side [NPS] or that side [CRC]?" it's been a confusing picture (George, Assistant Chief Constable)

[post-unification] I can recognise there's been an attempt to build a relationship with me as a PCC in some forums, then there's other meetings where [the Regional Probation Director] doesn't come and sends someone else and that suggests they're not as interested ... they're very keen to emphasise what it is they're doing, whether that is enough to build confidence I don't know if I'm quite there yet (Freya, PCC)

Similar patterns of judgement – where individual-level credibility built through direct engagement with probation colleagues was distinguished from broader perceptions of a service in crisis – are evident at the operational level. As the examples below illustrate, police participants' close working relationships with probation staff gave rise to layered concerns about the strength of multi-agency collaboration. First, there was concern for the well-being of probation colleagues visibly struggling under pressure. Second, there was concern for the service itself, which was seen as unable to perform optimally due to resource constraints. Third, and most critically, there was apprehension about the knock-on effects for police partners and the integrity of joint working arrangements.

The depth of understanding expressed by police participants, particularly regarding the strain probation was under, highlighted the closeness of these working relationships. It also underscored how visible and routine the challenges of delivering collaborative practice had become.

three probation officers have gone off sick, carrying 30 cases each, but those 90 cases need reallocating [and] that's quite a bit of work for the Senior Probation Officer. So, then they have that caseload, and then they go sick. The round-robin it that we're trying to find out who's actually got the case now and yes, it's impacting operational resilience, it really is as they're flat out (Hadley, Sergeant)

The biggest threat now to confidence is a lack of resources. Any post-reunification impact hasn't been realised due to challenges with recruitment. Locally there are not enough Probation Officers or Probation Service Officers, and this is having an impact – both on case management and on court work (Leigh, PCC)

A series of inspection reports conducted since the unification of probation services, alongside a recent thematic review, have clearly documented the sector's ongoing challenges with recruitment and retention (HMIP 2023, 2025). These assessments are echoed by the reflections of operational and strategic police actors working closely with probation colleagues, offering grounded insights into the practical difficulties of engaging with a service experiencing organisational trauma. While some concerns relate to short-term lapses in performance that threaten operational resilience, a more pressing issue emerges from the perception that these challenges are not merely episodic but symptomatic of a deeper, more enduring crisis. Many police participants expressed apprehension that internal tensions within the newly unified Probation Service undermine efforts to (re)establish organisational legitimacy, casting doubt on its capacity to function as a stable and reliable partner in multi-agency collaboration.

we see a 'them and us', but not in relation to police and probation ... we see a divide between two teams within probation [where] the probation officers are quite negative about the [former] CRC staff. The probation officers are highly skilled, highly trained and have done all degree courses. A CRC Probation Service Officer, for example, was on the reception desk three months ago, and he's now got an IOM caseload, it's a recipe for disaster. That person doesn't quite understand risk, doesn't quite understand the sharing of information, doesn't understand the urgency of some things that need addressing [and] then you have people coming out of prison with no accommodation' (Heidi, Inspector)

Two years after unification, Heidi's account powerfully echoed concerns shared by many participants about working with a partner organisation that felt fractured and disjointed. Despite the structural merger of the National Probation Service (NPS) and Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs)

into a single Probation Service, divisions between staff groups remained. These enduring divides reflect findings by Millings et al. (2023), who observed that many probation practitioners continued to struggle with integrating distinct organisational identities.

Police actors perceive the consequences of this fragmentation not only in how probation professionals speak about their colleagues, but also in apparent inconsistencies in their ability to perform core functions such as risk assessment and offender management. Like many in our sample, Heidi has worked with probation across the pre-, during-, and post-TR periods. Their reflections move beyond a simplistic 'policy failure' narrative, offering more searching evaluations of probation's organisational value.

This suggests that unification alone has been insufficient to restore legitimacy. Concerns ran deeper than the 'normalizing account' (as Suchman 1995, p. 598 describes it) that frames TR as a flawed model that has simply been discontinued. Drawing on both probation staff's descriptions of internal cultural dynamics and police partners' direct experiences of joint working, a growing concern emerged about the coherence of the service's structure and its capacity to manage people on probation effectively.

Importantly, the legacy of fragmentation left by TR was not only visible to long-standing collaborators. Even those relatively new to partnership working were forming impressions of probation that emphasised disunity. Jody, an Inspector who had worked with probation only since reunification, described how quickly they were able to identify contrasting leadership styles – prompting questions about the consistency of probation's core values and operational principles. Others echoed this view. Sam, a Sergeant, noted, routine engagement with probation colleagues often 'equipped you with this language of legacy NPS staff doing it this way and legacy CRC staff doing it that way'. Such observations reinforce our perception that the probation service's internal struggles to integrate were unfolding in full view of its partners – with consequences that may undermine confidence and trust in the unified service.

From outside, you see that different leadership style, different decision making, different perspective of risk. The NPS side, their MAPPAs meetings are direct, to the point, "Let's manage the risk. Let's reduce the risk. Let's reduce the harm." The CRC side is more around, "How can we rehabilitate? How can we turn them around? What skills can we give them?" and I felt that I was the one saying, "Hang on, we've got this protection risk that we need to manage". And there still is that divide between them (Jody, Inspector)

Taken together, the assessments offered by our police participants suggest that probation, three years on from unification, commanded a low level of *pragmatic legitimacy*. While there remained a strong respect for probation colleagues – and empathy for the difficult conditions they faced – police respondents frequently described having to adapt to, and compensate for, persistent blockages in partnership working. Although such challenges might be expected in the context of staffing shortages and critical inspection outcomes (see HMIP 2025, 2023), what troubled many was the perception that these issues were not temporary but systemic. Drawing on a decade or more of experience working alongside probation, many in our sample pointed to the seismic disruption caused by Transforming Rehabilitation (TR), and how its legacy continued to shape working practices, often to the detriment of effective, collaborative service delivery.

Moral legitimacy in practice: how probation's professional ethos shapes police perceptions of the service

In contrast to the narrow, self-interested focus of pragmatic legitimacy, judgements about an organisation's moral legitimacy centre on a prosocial logic where the activity the partner engages in 'is the right thing to do'. Here partners move beyond assessments of existing working operations to make judgements about the character and principles of the individuals and organisations they are collaborating with. When we analyse the commentaries of those with extensive histories of working with probation, we can see that their moral evaluations about their probation peers are resoundingly positive and rooted in accounts of collaborative (and complimentary) partnership working. In many

instances, they are also rooted in strong personal relationships that have been nurtured over many years – and where individuals become a personification of an agency – but they also relate to a very clear sense they articulate about where they felt probation services fit within systems of criminal justice working.

When I think probation I think accuracy, good, solid, independent assessments. Expertise, knowledge of the wider system and access into the specialist areas of the system. [I think] collaboration and a strong sense of those public service values. Individuals who absolutely at their heart are wanting to ensure that what we are trying to do is rehabilitate people, mitigate threat and risk and prevent them from causing harm. (Alex, Deputy Chief Constable)

That all in our sample articulated a keen awareness of the complex staffing and workload challenges facing the unified Probation Service is important. But in their assessments of what probation was and what it can be, they moved beyond sympathy for the plight of the service to a deeper appreciation of the traumas experienced by professionals who are not able to deliver on their operational priorities as effectively as they would like. In these commentaries we can see a shift from thinking about forms of pragmatic to moral legitimacy. Alex, above, explicitly identified the skills of assessment, developing holistic packages of support for individuals to support their rehabilitation, and the commitment to longer-term working with service users that characterised what they considered – and have observed – as good probation practice and the values of the staff that underpin it. Micah, below, echoes these views and could see that whilst conditions in the immediate aftermath of unification are hampering effective working, they remain convinced that the appetite to deliver good practice – to demonstrate professional curiosity – is manifest in the way probation peers acted and behaved.

They know what the goal is. They're just spread very thin ... people rushing to move from one place to another and not demonstrating that professional curiosity because they've got a list of stuff to get done before they can move onto the next and that's the pressure ... they're doing a quick job and not a thorough job. (Micah, Superintendent)

Reflections on the moral dimensions of probation work reveal two key dynamics. First, police perspectives often transcend current operational challenges to articulate a distinctive probation identity – one that meaningfully enhances their aspirations for collaborative practice. At the strategic level, this is evident in the engagement of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and Chief Officer Group members with named probation leaders in national working groups. These individuals were frequently described as 'some of the most professional, competent and ethical practitioners I've encountered in my career' (Dale, Chief Constable). Among those with long-standing experience in partnership work, there was a shared recognition of enduring professional respect: 'we may not always agree, but our dialogue is grounded in deep mutual respect and recognition of each other's expertise' (Chris, Chief Superintendent). Even among newer staff – those without institutional memory of pre-TR arrangements – there was an appreciation for probation's person-centred ethos: 'there's a level of care and welfare in how they approach public protection' (Carly, Sergeant).

Second, the perceived moral legitimacy of probation was reinforced by the way police narratives constructed probation as a kindred public service – one similarly undervalued despite its vital societal role. Like the police, probation practitioners are seen as frontline actors whose contributions to community safety often go unseen. This shared sense of under-recognition, coupled with what our sample of police actors judged was a shared duty to reduce harm, underpins how police partners describe effective interagency collaboration.

the probation people I'm seeing at MAPPA meetings have a clear passion for what they do and passion for public service ... we know what each can deliver and the passion is there for protection, safeguarding, serving the public, and rehabilitating people. The people we supervise just do bad things, but it's our job in the end to help them along the path (Grant, Deputy Chief Constable)

The way police participants responded to assessments from HM Inspectorate of Probation of inspected areas being judged as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' further illustrated the

sense of moral affinity they felt with their probation counterparts. Drawing on their own experiences of receiving what they perceived as overly blunt evaluations from their own Inspectorate, police respondents reflected on the external damage such reports can cause. These reflections led them to question the ability of inspection processes to fully capture ‘the unrelenting pressures and demands organisations like ours face’ (Eden, PCC Chief Executive).

Rather than reinforcing the kind of ‘negative contagion’ Suchman (1995, p. 597) describes – where external criticism erodes an organisation’s legitimacy – these responses instead revived individual’s own feelings of being unfairly and inaccurately judged by their own Inspectorate. In doing so, they deepened police participants’ empathy for probation colleagues. Their instinct to defend probation was rooted in a shared understanding that only those operating within the same organisational alliance – and subject to similar moral and operational demands – can truly appreciate the complexities of multi-agency working in criminal justice.

it would be naïve to say [negative inspection reports] don’t have some impact on your perception because they do, [but] it certainly doesn’t influence my perception because I’ve had the benefit of directly work with some high-quality individuals and the experience I’ve got from decades in policing [helps me] understand that actually an under resourced public service without the capacity or the capability to deliver what a society wants means that you quite often will find some of those negative inspectorate reports (Alex, Deputy Chief Constable)

In contrast to the often-strained assessments of day-to-day joint working – which many felt undermined probation’s pragmatic legitimacy – police participants consistently expressed strong confidence in the professionalism and integrity of their probation partners. This enduring respect reflected the high levels of moral legitimacy they attributed to the service. What resonated most with police voices was the steadfast commitment of credible and principled probation leaders and practitioners to uphold core organisational values – even when such dedication to public service went unrecognised by others. That capacity of the majority of our sample to highlight what they considered to be probation practitioner’s focus on ethical practice, particularly under pressure, reinforced their perception of the moral legitimacy of probation services.

Cognitive legitimacy: police sense-making of probation and their own role in multi-agency criminal justice

Suchman (1995) defines cognitive legitimacy as a condition in which an organisation’s existence and activities are taken for granted – where alternatives are rendered unthinkable, challenges implausible and the organisation exists beyond scrutiny. Police participants in this study, having worked with probation partners before, during and after the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) reforms, offered a unique perspective: they described a sense of having partially ‘lost’ and subsequently ‘re-gained’ their organisational counterpart. The observation that ‘it all feels intuitively better now it’s back to being one publicly owned probation service’ (Freya, PCC) signals the hope that a transitional phase may be ending, but also an implicit belief in a natural, cognitively legitimate configuration of the organisational alliance. Police reflections on what was lost during TR – and the perceived risks of introducing private providers into criminal justice delivery – underscored the value they place on probation as a partner. These accounts offer insight into the cognitive legitimacy attributed to probation and position the period between the implementation and subsequent reversal of the TR reform programme as a cautionary episode in the delivery of inter-agency collaboration.

Our sample, all of whom have themselves worked within multi-agency structures, framed collaborative working as necessary, with distinct, yet complementary roles to be played by probation and police. Their reflections revealed a deeper sense of organisational interdependence: a co-constituted relationship in which the roles of each agency are so embedded in joint working arrangements that their collaboration is perceived as essential and inevitable. One Inspector, for example, pointed to the development of regional Violence Reduction Units as a site where police and

probation dynamically operationalise their partnership. This example illustrates not only the adaptability of interagency practice but also the value placed on such collaboration in achieving shared goals.

[in tackling the conditions that precipitate violence] it is the healthy and constructive challenge to our way thinking that comes from working with probation. We are having to shift our thinking and having the reset to think about why the violence and the decision-making behind it, and that longer-term thinking is where probation colleagues bring so much to what we collectively are trying to do (Daryl, Inspector)

The perception of police – probation partnerships as inherently co-dependent is strongly reflected in the assessments offered by senior police leaders. In the two quotes that follow, both operational and strategic leaders articulate more than just a broadly shared, taken for granted view of multi-agency collaboration. Their reflections also reveal a belief that police have an active role to play in reinforcing public and institutional confidence in probation, thereby safeguarding an organisational alliance they see as best positioned to reduce crime.

This perspective aligns with the foundational principles of effective interagency collaboration – particularly mutual respect and open communication – as identified by Mawby and Worrall (2011) and Nash (2014). Across the interviews, police participants consistently framed joint working not as optional or supplementary, but as essential to addressing the persistent and structural causes of crime. Their faith in partnership working aligns with contributions to the evidence base in the fields of domestic abuse (Robinson and Davies 2026) and safeguarding (Ball et al. 2024) that narrate the demonstrable impact of co-ordinated partnership working by police and probation partners. Their accounts suggest that these partnerships are not only coordinated but synergistic, where the collective impact exceeds the sum of individual contributions. This framing underscores a deep commitment to a shared organisational alliance, one in which interdependence is both strategic and normative.

[when] working with a strategic partner who may be struggling, whether it's because of resource, staff capability, leadership, actually we've got a duty to support and provide that assistance [because] we're only as strong as our weakest link (Alex, Deputy Chief Constable)

you're more likely to reduce crime by supporting and if you can bring probation into that plan around community safety, you'll be able to reduce crime significantly ... the focus is around more police officers, that's not how you reduce crime, if you put the same focus into probation you'd be far more likely to reduce crime (Leigh, PCC)

Across the interviews with senior, experienced police leaders such as Alex and Leigh, collaborative working between police and probation was consistently presented as both taken-for-granted and essential to reducing reoffending. While this partly reflects a pragmatic response to policy imperatives promoting inter-organisational collaboration, it also reveals a deeper, intuitive belief among our sample that such partnerships are mutually beneficial and worth sustaining.

This belief is not passive. As the quotes above suggest, police leaders see themselves as active stewards of these relationships – responsible for defending their value and resisting external pressures that threaten their integrity. In Leigh's case, this includes challenging government initiatives perceived to undermine effective collaboration. For example, they described the 2019 commitment to recruit 20,000 additional police officers as short-sighted, arguing that without parallel investment in support services, such measures fail to deliver sustainable solutions to reoffending.

While these accounts resonate with notions of moral legitimacy – particularly in the positive assessments of probation's commitment to 'doing the right thing' – they also invite interpretation through the lens of cognitive legitimacy. Participants' reflections reveal how both police and probation actors construct a vision of multi-agency working that feels natural, necessary and institutionally embedded. This is especially evident in how they contrasted current arrangements with the disruptions introduced by the TR reforms. In doing so, they make judgements not only about the organisational legitimacy of probation partners, but also that of the broader organisational alliance they wish to sustain.

Structural reform and the dynamics of organisational legitimacy: probation as a cautionary tale

Suchman's (1995) conceptualisation of the three forms of organisational legitimacy offers a valuable lens through which to interpret police perceptions of the Probation Service, three years post-reunification. This period has been marked by a perceived legitimacy deficit, shaped in large part by the lingering effects of the failed Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) reforms. Drawing on insights from police personnel in both strategic national roles and frontline operational contexts, our analysis shows how these reforms continue to influence how probation is understood and engaged with by police and other criminal justice partners.

The findings also highlight that police actors – drawn from both strategic and operational domains – have a clear sense of who they believe should be part of a public protection operational alliance. They place significant importance on what they consider shared values and partnership principles, which they increasingly associate with working alongside public sector organisations. This suggests that, in their view, legitimacy is not only about organisational performance but also about alignment in ethos and institutional identity.

Our study engaged individuals who worked with probation across the pre-TR, TR and post-reunification phases. This provided unique insights into how structural reform has affected the health of multi-agency criminal justice collaboration. Lynda, a Chief Executive in a Police and Crime Commissioner's Office, and Steven, a frontline Constable involved in Integrated Offender Management (IOM), reflect on their evolving relationships with probation. Their accounts highlight how TR disrupted routine partnership practices, undermining the negotiation of pragmatic legitimacy – the everyday trust and credibility built through consistent, functional collaboration. More significantly, both express concerns about perceived shifts in the character and values of probation as a partner agency – concerns rooted in their distinct positions within the partnership landscape.

[with the privatised probation providers] your line of control goes the more you sub-contract out ... we didn't know who was actually delivering interventions. We were making sense of who had passed what on to who and were judging how effectively services were being contract-managed as much as the outputs of the commissioned work. All felt very disjointed and one probation service doing it today and knowing who is delivering what and where feels much clearer and valid (Lynda, PCC Chief Executive)

we went from full partnership working round the table to one seat at the table now profiting from the good work of all of us. We were all pulling in the same direction, but someone is getting payment by results, and it fundamentally changed the spirit in the group. You started to question if everyone is on the same page and you started to question whether you should collaborate as much. Years of work was undone in weeks, and we are now, thankfully, getting things back on track (Steven, IOM PC)

While both acknowledge that reunification has helped restore a sense of stability and shared purpose, their reflections also underscore the extent to which TR challenged the capacity and inclination for collaborative working. Implicit in their narratives is a call for renewed commitment to partnership, and a recognition that the mixed economy of provision introduced under TR fundamentally strained the legitimacy and coherence of inter-agency relationships.

In a manner consistent with views from across our sample, we observe a form of dissonance among police practitioners – not directed at individual probation colleagues who they consider command *moral* legitimacy, but at the organisational structure of the probation service itself. Echoing Steve's account of the shifting (IOM) landscape, these reflections frame the challenges of working with probation not as interpersonal issues, but as systemic and structural ones. There is a shared perception that these challenges stem from external changes imposed on the partnership framework in which they operate.

A reluctance to criticise individual probation staff – whom officers often empathise with – plays a part in this dynamic. But equally important is how police practitioners use the probation experience to surface their own vulnerabilities to organisational change, particularly their 'cultural resistance' (White 2015, p. 288) to the marketisation of policing and public services more broadly. This resistance

was evident when the same Coalition Government that enacted the TR reforms in 2014 attempted to open what White (2015, p. 295) termed a 'police outsource window' in 2010. The proposal met with deep opposition. By 2012, the window had closed. Outsourcing was removed from the policy agenda, as the public and political backlash intensified following G4S's failure to meet its Olympics security contract – a debacle that generated widespread negative publicity and triggered a parliamentary inquiry. While certain operational functions – such as the management of custody suites and selected investigative activities – remained intact, the more ambitious, organisation-wide restructuring initiatives were ultimately abandoned.

As White (2015, p. 288) noted, in the lead-up to the November 2012 PCC elections, many candidates used this momentum to campaign on anti-privatisation platforms. A general scepticism towards markets had erupted 'into a fierce critical discourse'. Underpinning this, Loader et al. (2014, p. 479) observe, is a culturally informed belief that policing is a public good – one that should be accessible to all. The idea that money might 'leverage an increased share of a public good' is seen not only as unfair but as something that 'corrodes the value of that good'.

These concerns were echoed by participants. Lynda spoke of the 'inevitable unease managers must process when you are selling off core duties', while Steven described the 'moral dilemma when knowing that to breach might be a denial of income for the company'. Though these may appear as simplified portrayals of working within a devolved service, Carly, a sergeant, captured a deeper anxiety: 'it may be us sold off next if we can't show results quick enough'.

This sentiment reveals how exposed many police practitioners felt to the same disruptive reforms that had affected probation. Their language often mirrored the 'exaggerated and emotive' discourse White (2015, p. 295) identifies in debates about policing privatisation. At a time when both probation and policing organisations are placing increasing emphasis on technology – through the adoption of artificial intelligence tools, facial recognition systems, and expanded forms of electronic surveillance – the reliance on external actors for service delivery ensures that the private sector's involvement remains both significant and enduring. However, for most of our participants, the perceived failure of the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) programme – in particular the organisational-level outsourcing of probation – served as a cautionary tale. It was not only a warning to other criminal justice agencies but also a threat to a broader organisational ecosystem grounded in what our police participants judged – consistent with Dale below – as shared public service values to protect the public and to work collaboratively in managing risk within communities. In strong and often critical terms, participants used the probation experience to reaffirm their belief in public sector delivery and to highlight the perceived ethical and cultural divide between public and private sector actors.

For all the arguments around privatization and more efficient working, I'm not convinced. Big public services need to be delivered by governments ... Certainly when I work with big private sector organisations, I don't see inspired leadership or really motivated employees living out their vocation. I see accountants trying to squeeze profit out of everything ... I think there is something ideological about policing and the probation service – about the sense of vocation for why we do what we do. (Dale, Chief Constable)

The widespread view that a sense of normalcy has returned with the reunification of probation services under public control reinforces the belief that police and probation are constituent parts of a coherent public protection organisational alliance. Rather than undermining probation's legitimacy, the backlash against the mixed economy of rehabilitation services rendered outsourced models illegitimate in the eyes of some police leaders. Drawing on Suchman's concept of *cognitive* legitimacy, these officers did not need to imagine a world without probation – they felt they had already experienced its disempowerment through TR. Now, with probation's return to the public sector, the narrative of failed privatisation strengthens their conviction that criminal justice should remain firmly within the public domain. It was only when TR reforms obscured the presence and role of probation peers that police practitioners fully recognised the loss of moral legitimacy – and only through a renewed commitment to shared civic duty could that legitimacy be restored. Analysing police

actors' reflections on their relationships with probation counterparts through the lens of Suchman's typology of organisational legitimacy, as we have demonstrated, provides valuable insight into the dynamics shaping perceptions of legitimacy restoration – particularly in terms of whether such efforts are regarded as transient or enduring.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship examining the consequences of probation service unification – not only for policymakers (Annisson et al. 2024), senior probation leaders (Robinson et al. 2026), and frontline practitioners (Millings et al. 2023, 2025) – but uniquely, from the perspective of police partners navigating multi-agency collaboration amid repeated organisational upheaval. Drawing on interviews with a diverse range of police voices, including senior leaders, frontline officers, and those embedded in partnership structures, we have explored how probation is perceived from outside the service, particularly in terms of its organisational legitimacy.

Framing these experiences through Suchman's (1995) typology of organisational legitimacy has enabled us to surface a layered and dynamic set of evaluations. We begin from the premise that legitimacy is not fixed, but transitional – won and lost through ongoing professional encounters. Across our sample, participants consistently described operational challenges in working with probation, often judging its *pragmatic* legitimacy to be low due to limited capacity and the perceived instability of a 'post-traumatic service' (Robinson 2022, p. 264) still reeling from successive structural reforms. This was especially evident among newer staff who struggled to conceptualise probation as a coherent or reliable partner and who don't have the corporate memories to draw upon to make sense of working with probation any differently.

Yet these concerns did not result in wholesale rejection. Many participants – particularly experienced practitioners – offered thoughtful reflections on the enduring value of probation work. Their assessments were grounded in long-standing relationships and shared practice, reinforcing probation's *moral* legitimacy, perceived resilience and 'survivability' (Suddaby et al. 2017, p. 457). Probation was often portrayed as a kindred public service: one striving to meet unrealistic expectations set by government and the wider public, frequently with limited recognition. These evaluations were shaped by accumulated knowledge, trust, and a sense of shared commitment to public protection. For our sample of police actors, this commitment was not only operational but also relational – rooted in the belief that probation, despite its challenges, remains a vital and valued partner in multi-agency work.

Two key insights emerge. First, legitimacy breaches in one organisation ripple across institutional alliances, affecting the quality of collaborative practice. In criminal justice, these dynamics have tangible consequences for how public protection is delivered. Second, the experience of probation's outsourcing and reunification has sharpened police actors' awareness of the organisational alliance they inhabit – and wish to sustain. The harms associated with Transforming Rehabilitation were used to reassert the principles they believe underpin effective partnership working.

Three years on, police participants expressed cautious optimism about the reunification of probation services. Yet the legacy of Transforming Rehabilitation remains vivid – a cautionary tale that underscores the fragility of multi-agency collaboration. Their reflections go beyond evaluations of probation as a partner; they reveal deeper beliefs about the nature of effective, interdependent multi-agency arrangements. The analysis of the accounts they offer has enabled us to demonstrate that the failed outsourcing of probation has come to symbolise broader anxieties about the marketisation of criminal justice. In making sense of how their version of *cognitive* legitimacy was lost – and how it is now being gradually rebuilt through reunification – police leaders reaffirm their belief that public protection goals are best pursued through partnerships between public services. This belief is not only rooted in operational experience but also in a normative commitment to collaboration as a shared responsibility.

In this way, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how legitimacy is co-constructed within the evolving field of public protection, and how police perceptions can serve as a lens through which the dynamics of partnership working are made visible.

Notes

1. The Serious Violence Duty – written into the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 – requires specified authorities (including police and probation) to collaborate and plan to work together to share information and target interventions that prevent and reduce serious violence.
2. This research ‘Rehabilitating Probation: Rebuilding culture, identify and legitimacy in a reformed public service’ is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Ref ES/W001101/1).
3. Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee Number 21/LCP/015.
4. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025-statistical-release>

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Matthew Millings:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Gwen Robinson:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Harry Annisson:** Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing; **Lol Burke:** Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing; **Nicola Carr:** Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing.

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