

Policy Brief:

## Rehabilitating Probation: Rebuilding culture, identity and legitimacy in a reformed public service

*This policy briefing on the Rehabilitating Probation Project outlines the research, addresses the study's six core research questions and their findings, and highlights key insights with implications for policy development.*

### Executive Summary

**Rehabilitating Probation: Rebuilding culture, identity and legitimacy in a reformed public service** was a three-year (2022-2025) ESRC-funded research project that aimed to examine the implementation, experiences and consequences of a significant and unprecedented programme of public service reform that has brought formerly outsourced probation services back into the public sector.

### About the Research

Probation services across England and Wales were reunified following a period of large-scale privatisation under Transforming Rehabilitation reforms implemented in 2014, which had led to the establishment of a publicly operated National Probation Service (NPS) and a number of private Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs).

In June 2020 the public and private arms of probation were brought back together under a newly constituted public Probation Service. Over the course of three years, this project sought to understand this process from a range of perspectives. We completed 340 interviews with national policymakers, regional probation directors, probation managers and staff, people who have been supervised by probation, and representatives from criminal justice partner organisations to chart the impact of reform at local, regional and national levels.



Visit our project website [www.rehabilitating-probation.org.uk](http://www.rehabilitating-probation.org.uk) to learn more about our study aims, objectives and outputs.

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### Research Questions

**What are the challenges and dynamics of reuniting a fractured workforce within an expanded Probation Service?**

**Finding:** The integration of previously separate entities has been challenging. The Probation Service is grappling with a range of internal and systemic problems. Staffing issues—such as inexperience, high turnover, and skill gaps—have been exacerbated by the lasting impacts of COVID-19, including shifts in work attitudes and difficulties in reuniting a now more disparate workforce. A lack of clarity around the organisation's core purpose, and ongoing tensions between centralised control and local autonomy have further weakened cohesion. These issues have unfolded within a wider context of political instability, austerity, and the disruptive legacy of past reforms like Transforming Rehabilitation.

*Our article [‘A necessary but painful journey: Experiences of unification in a probation service region’](#) explores the views of probation leaders and practitioners in our case study region that capture the challenges of working in this climate.*

**How does a mixed economy of probation service providers harmonise and evolve?**

**Finding:** Efforts to evolve a mixed economy of probation provision face significant cultural, structural, and financial barriers. Innovation is constrained by a centralised civil service structure, a rigid audit culture, and limited space for local initiative or change leadership. Attempts to decentralise decision-making and enable localised commissioning have struggled against hierarchical systems. Trust between public, private, and voluntary providers has been eroded—particularly by past reforms like Transforming Rehabilitation—making collaboration difficult. Compounding these issues, funding cuts from central government have undermined local efforts to build diverse and sustainable service models.

*Our article [‘A fork in the road: Probation unification in England and Wales two years on’](#) examines the challenges for the unified service in learning from, and drawing through, working practices developed by CRCs.*

## What are the consequences of reform for the roles, identities and cultures of probation workers?

**Finding:** Probation reforms have significantly impacted occupational culture and workforce identity. A lack of clarity about probation's role and purpose have created conflicting priorities for staff. Increased standardisation has reduced staff autonomy and limited professional discretion. Organisational upheaval and high staff turnover have further disrupted probation culture. These changes continue to impact morale, identity, and effectiveness across the service.

Our article *'Anchors Through Change'* explores how probation staff seek to manage and protect their professional identity during periods of organisational change and in *'Constrained voice and complicated loyalty'* we explore why probation staff choose to stay in or leave their roles using Hirschman's Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect framework.

## How can probation reform(re)build confidence in the local, regional and national criminal justice fields?

**Finding:** Building confidence in probation requires acknowledging the complexity and fragmentation of the criminal justice system. Differences in geography, structure, and relationships between agencies like courts, police, and prisons create barriers to collaboration. Strengthening communication—particularly through effective probation representation in inter-agency fora—is essential. A clearer, more authoritative national voice for probation is also needed to boost confidence and communicate the role and purposes of probation to the public. Consistent delivery of probation services is critical to engender confidence.

Our articles *'Policing the Partnership'* and *'Courting Confidence in Probation'* explore how external probation partners, police and court actors respectively, judge the organisational legitimacy of probation services and of how claims of legitimacy are strengthened or weakened. In the article *'Whose confidence?'* we explore the question of which audiences Regional Probation Directors judge as the most important to (re)build relationships with and consider some of the challenges associated with confidence-building work.

**Our article *'Indifference, resistance, possibility: Probation staff perspectives on the introduction of professional registration'* captures the views of probation workers in the months leading up to the formal establishment of the Professional Registration policy framework and what implications they felt it would have for their careers.**

## What design and implementation challenges are faced by senior policymakers overseeing probation reform?

**Finding:** Probation faces significant challenges in balancing national-level structural reforms with empowering frontline staff to work effectively. Tensions arise between top-down directives and the need for local autonomy, as well as between policy intentions and the realities of implementation. Rebuilding trust among probation staff—many of whom feel alienated by past reforms—is crucial. Policymakers often lack a deep understanding of probation, typically engaging with it only during crises or in relation to prisons. Additionally, the service must navigate complex accountability structures and political demands, which add bureaucratic pressure and strain.

Our article *'Making Good'* presents a narrative reconstruction of the unification of probation, based on reflections by senior policy makers. In our article *'Lessons for Public Management Reform'* we explore how findings from our focus on the insourcing of probation services can help make sense of organisational change in other sectors. Both articles conclude with discussion of the tensions and challenges faced regarding questions of probation's purpose and values

## How do service users experience being on probation during a phase of reform?

**Finding:** Service users' experiences of probation are varied. Their expectations of probation are influenced by their personal circumstances and needs. Some would like more practical support and assistance but have experienced diminished time and resources. For understandable reasons, service users often focus on practical challenges in engaging with probation, like accessibility and the continuity of supervision, rather than the vagaries of probation reforms. The study highlights the value of co-producing research with service users to better capture these diverse and nuanced experiences.

Drawing on exercises and activities co-designed by peer researchers from the Rehabilitating Probation project—who were keen to revisit core questions about the purpose of probation—a series of workshops brought together individuals with diverse experiences of the service, including both former staff and those previously supervised by probation. To hear their voices and learn more about the workshops, listen to *the three-part podcast series produced for the Prison Radio Association's The Secret Life of Prisons*, which explores key themes from the study.

## Key Findings from the Research

### Impact and Legacies of Organisational Change

Frequent structural reforms, chronic staffing shortages, and poor working conditions have created a climate of instability in probation services. This has significantly affected staff well-being and undermined the delivery of effective practice.

#### **Disproportionate Focus on Organisational Change -**

Senior leaders report spending the majority of their time managing structural reforms rather than focusing on core responsibilities. This has diverted attention from frontline service delivery and strategic development.

**Instability Embedded in Professional Identity -** Staff describe their careers in terms of reforms rather than tenure, reflecting how deeply organisational change has shaped the profession and disrupted continuity.

**Culture of Emotional Strain -** The cumulative impact of ongoing disruption has fostered a sense of crisis within the service. Long-serving staff frequently describe their experiences in terms of trauma.

To restore stability and support effective practice, there is an urgent need for sustained investment in workforce well-being, leadership capacity, and organisational continuity. Minimising disruption and rebuilding trust will be critical to retaining experienced staff and delivering high-quality probation services.

### Preserving Professional Craft in a Changing Service

While probation staff remain deeply committed to their roles, systemic pressures are undermining the conditions necessary for effective service delivery and professional development.

**Inexperienced Workforce -** Nearly 50% of staff in many units have less than two years' experience, with limited exposure to in-person training and peer learning.

**Diminished Support Structures -** New staff feel underprepared and hesitant to seek help. Experienced staff are overstretched, reducing opportunities for mentorship and knowledge transfer.

**Lack of Reflective Practice -** Staff across all roles express a strong need for time and space to reflect and improve practice—resources currently in short supply.

**Individual vs. Collective Capacity -** While 70% of staff feel confident in their own abilities, concerns about overall service quality point to a growing disconnect between individual competence and team impact.

To sustain high-quality probation delivery, investment is needed in structured training, peer support systems, and protected time for reflective practice. Addressing these gaps is critical to retaining talent and strengthening collective performance.

## Strengthening Probation's Legitimacy

Probation's legitimacy and influence within the criminal justice system are under pressure. Despite strong professional respect, repeated reforms and public scrutiny have weakened external confidence—posing risks to effective multi-agency collaboration.

**Strong Professional Respect -** Criminal justice partners express deep empathy for probation staff and recognise the unique, person-centred value the service brings—particularly in its ability to offer constructive challenge and holistic support.

**Credibility of Practitioners -** The reputation of probation is upheld by the professionalism of its leaders and experienced staff, who continue to command respect across the system.

**Fragile Confidence -** Confidence in probation remains vulnerable. Past reforms—especially Transforming Rehabilitation—have left lasting reputational damage that has not been fully addressed.

Probation's legitimacy is not just symbolic; it is essential to its effectiveness as a justice partner. A clear, enduring commitment to visibility, stability, and professional voice is needed to rebuild confidence and reinforce probation's role in delivering safer communities.

### Individual and Collective Vulnerability

Probation practitioners are working under increasing scrutiny and operational pressure, leading to growing concerns about workforce resilience, particularly in sentence management roles.

**Emotional Impact of Scrutiny -** Staff report heightened anxiety linked to inspections, serious further offence (SFO) reviews, and rapid policy changes. These pressures are affecting morale and professional confidence across the service.

**Gap Between Vision and Reality -** While committed to delivering high-quality, person-centred supervision, practitioners face significant barriers due to resource constraints and operational demands.

**Defensive Practice Culture -** A shift toward risk-averse, compliance-focused decision-making is limiting professional autonomy and undermining the service's rehabilitative mission.

**Critical Pressure in Sentence Management -** Sentence management staff are experiencing the most acute strain—marked by low job satisfaction, high administrative burden, and a diminished sense of long-term professional identity.

To safeguard service quality and workforce sustainability, targeted investment is needed to strengthen operational capacity and (re)build practitioner confidence.

## A synthesis of recommendations for probation

*In recent years, the Probation Service in England and Wales has undergone substantial structural reforms. Amid these significant changes, there has been comparatively less focus on the fundamental purposes and core functions of probation. Drawing on insights from all aspects of the research — including the perspectives of a diverse range of stakeholders — we conclude by outlining key characteristics that should define the future of probation.*

### Community Focused

A community-focused probation service should be locally based and attuned to the specific needs of the communities it serves. By maintaining strong connections with local support networks, it can provide more holistic and accessible interventions. Its ability to understand and address local issues is essential to building trust, promoting rehabilitation, and enhancing community safety.

### Rehabilitation-Centred

The role of probation has become increasingly complex. Fundamentally the role of probation is to support individuals to change and reintegrate. A focus on supporting people to change needs to be balanced with public protection. These are not mutually exclusive aims.

### Employ a Diverse and Skilled Workforce

In order to carry out its functions the Probation Service needs to employ well-trained and appropriately remunerated staff. The workforce should be diverse and representative of the communities that probation works with. Staff need to be provided with access to development opportunities. They should be properly supported throughout their careers.

### Collaborative

A collaborative probation service should work in close partnership with other agencies and stakeholders, fostering strong inter-agency relationships to support individuals and enhance community outcomes. It should serve as both a broker and a bridge — facilitating access to services, coordinating support, and ensuring continuity across systems. Embedded within a whole-systems approach to community safety, probation must contribute to a joined-up approach that addresses the complex needs of individuals while promoting public protection.

## Strategically Focused

A strategically focused probation service must be clear in its purpose and mission, aligning its activities with well-defined goals that support rehabilitation and public safety. Its practices should be grounded in robust evidence, ensuring that interventions are effective and outcomes are measurable. At the same time, it should remain innovative - adapting to emerging challenges and developing creative solutions to meet the complex needs of those under supervision.

## Appropriately Structured and Governed

An appropriately structured probation service should be locally governed, ensuring that it is responsive to the specific needs and priorities of the communities it serves. It should operate independently from the Prison Service, maintaining a distinct identity and focus on rehabilitation in the community. Empowered local leaders are essential to drive innovation, accountability, and effective service delivery at the regional level.

## Visible and Valued

The Probation Service needs to have a more prominent public voice. It should be recognised for its role in supporting rehabilitation and reintegration. As public understanding of the probation service deepens, there emerges greater potential for nuanced and evidence-informed perspectives on how its practices contribute incrementally to reducing recidivism and facilitating rehabilitative outcomes.



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