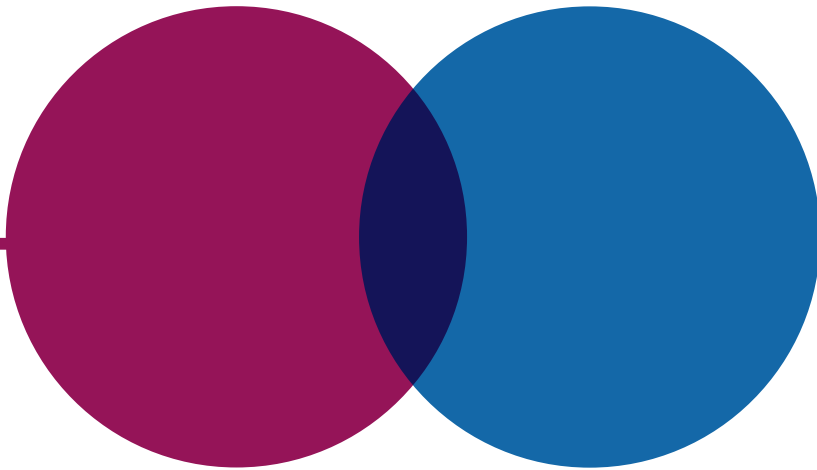




National Audit Office



REPORT

# Building an effective and resilient Probation Service

Ministry of Justice/HM Prison & Probation Service

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SESSION 2024–2026  
24 OCTOBER 2025  
HC 1354

## Key facts

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**£1.45bn**

cost of running the Probation Service in 2023-24

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**241,540**

number of people supervised by the Probation Service at March 2025

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**5,636**

Probation Officer grade full-time equivalent (FTE) staff in post in the Probation Service, 79% of its target staffing, as at March 2025

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- June 2021** date the Probation Service was brought back under full public control, reversing the partial privatisation of the service
- 24** percentage point decline in the proportion of Probation Service targets met in 2024-25, compared with July 2021 to March 2022
- 10 out of 12** probation regions exceeding 100% average workload for the Probation Officer grade as at July 2025
- 46** average number of Probation Delivery Units, out of 108, operating in 'Red' or 'Amber' status per month in 2024-25 and therefore not delivering all mandated sentence management activities to help manage high workloads
- 34%** approximate proportion by which HM Prison & Probation Service found it had underestimated the number of FTE staff required to run sentence management activity in 2024, equivalent to around 5,400 FTE staff
- 3,150** July 2025 estimate of shortfall in probation FTE staff working in sentence management in 2026-27 out of approximately 15,000 sentence management FTE staff required, even after recruitment and prioritisation measures

# Summary

## Introduction

**1** HM Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) is an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) in England and Wales. It is responsible for carrying out sentences given by the courts, in custody and the community, and for rehabilitating people in its care. In 2023-24, HMPPS spent £1.45 billion on the Probation Service. When people leave prison or receive community sentences, the Probation Service (part of HMPPS) aims to protect the public by managing any risks offenders pose, and to reduce the chance of them reoffending by supporting their rehabilitation in the community. MoJ estimates the social and economic cost of reoffending across adult offenders to be around £20.9 billion a year in 2024-25 prices.

**2** MoJ and HMPPS have implemented two major reorganisations of the Probation Service in the last 11 years. In 2014, MoJ had divided the service into private sector-led Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and the National Probation Service (NPS) through its Transforming Rehabilitation reforms. We reported on the reforms twice, concluding that the reforms had achieved poor value for money for the taxpayer.<sup>1</sup> In June 2021 HMPPS's Probation Reform Programme unified the service, bringing probation back under full public control.

**3** Since unification, the Probation Service has remained under significant strain, with staffing shortfalls, increasing pressures and continuing poor performance. HMPPS has sought to decrease staff workloads by reducing supervision activity and intervention for some lower- and medium-risk offenders (probation Reset) in April 2024, and then again in April 2025 (Impact). However, the Independent Sentencing Review (ISR), published in May 2025, recommends MoJ makes greater use of alternatives to prison to avoid running out of prison places. This will likely increase pressures on probation further. To enable it to cope with increased demand and improve performance, HMPPS has set up a programme to further transform the service.

<sup>1</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General, *Transforming Rehabilitation*, Session 2015-16, HC 951, National Audit Office, April 2016 and Comptroller and Auditor General, *Transforming Rehabilitation: Progress review*, Session 2017-2019, HC 1986, National Audit Office, March 2019.

**4** This report examines why HMPPS has not been able to improve performance of the service to date. It also assesses MoJ and HMPPS's progress in transforming the service and sets out what more it needs to do to achieve its future aims.

The report examines:

- Probation Service performance and HMPPS's understanding of this (Part One);
- why HMPPS has not been successful at improving the performance and resilience of the service post unification (Part Two); and
- how effectively MoJ and HMPPS are now working to improve the long-term resilience of the Probation Service (Part Three).

The report does not assess HMPPS's implementation of its Probation Reform Programme in 2021 or its 'One HMPPS' restructuring programme, which concluded in September 2024. The report focuses on probation supervision in the community, which largely consists of sentence management, the end-to-end process of supervision of offenders released from prison or serving a community order or suspended sentence order (**Figure 1** on pages 8 to 10). It does not assess probation activity in courts or in prisons in detail.

## **Key findings**

Probation performance post unification

### **5 Available data indicate that the performance of probation services has worsened since unification.**

- HMPPS sets performance metrics and targets, such as timeliness of appointments and delivery of services. HMPPS only met 26% (seven out of 27) of its targets in 2024-25, a 24 percentage point decline from 50% (eight out of 16) since July 2021 to March 2022. Some areas of performance are worse than others. In 2024-25, only 63% of offenders completed their unpaid work (UPW) requirement within the 12-month deadline, although the target was 75%. Poor performance in UPW requirements is partly caused by a backlog formed during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) carries out inspections of the Probation Service. Changes in HMIP's methodology post unification mean there are limitations when comparing its pre- and post-unification inspection data. However, available data suggest a deterioration in quality. For example, in 2024, HMIP found that probation practitioners adequately assessed risk of harm in just 28% of cases, compared with 60% in 2018-19. HMPPS's sentence management quality audits, which assess the standard of probation practice, also indicate issues with quality. Between 2021-22 and 2023-24, HMPPS's audits consistently rated overall service delivery as 'amber/red', indicating the service was not meeting good standards in "some regard" (paragraphs 1.8 to 1.13 and Figures 4, 5 and 6).

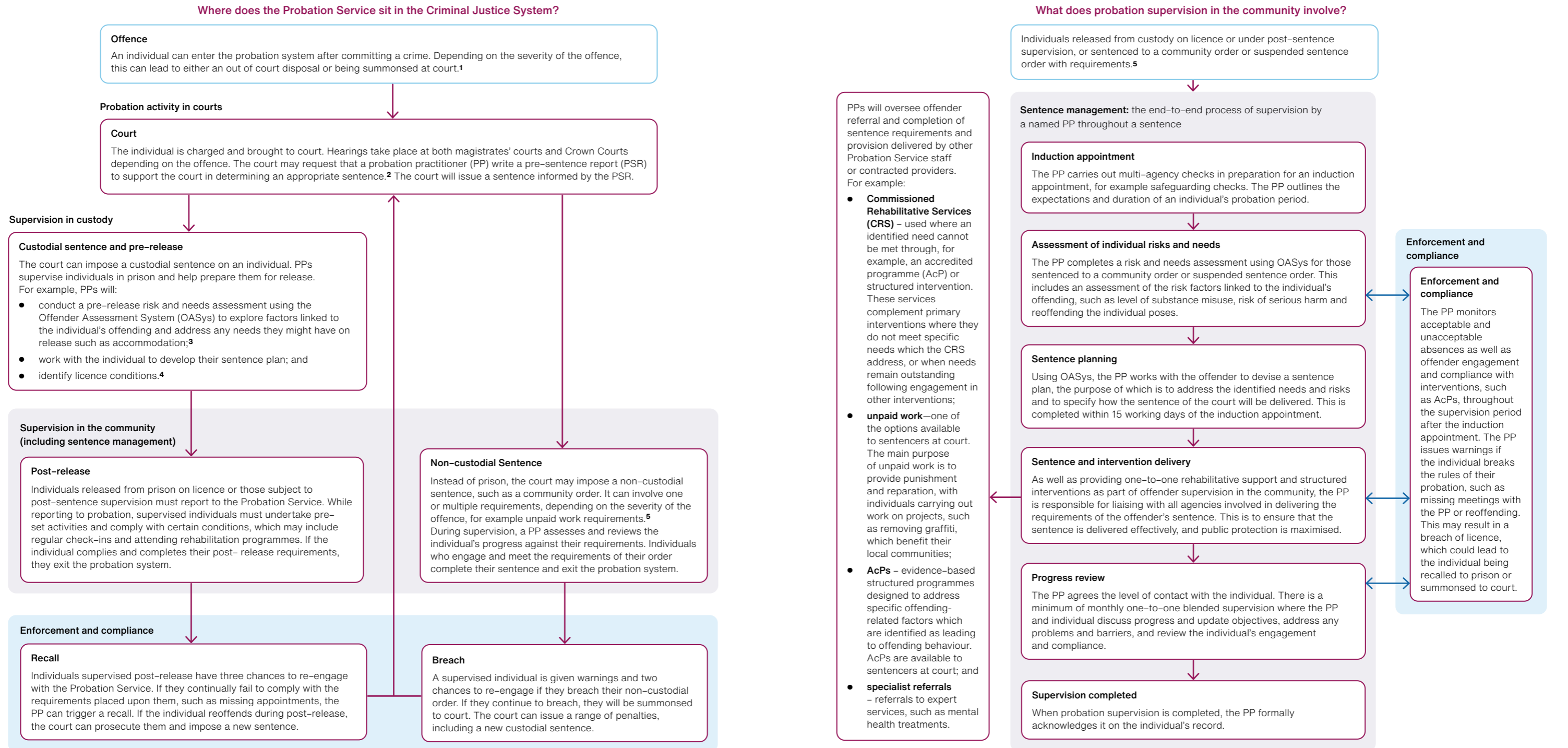
**6 The quality and timeliness of Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) has improved, and HMPPS has begun to monitor offender outcomes, but it plans to improve its approach for future contracts.** HMPPS awarded 138 CRS contracts, worth between £302 million to £349 million in total, which probation practitioners can draw on to support offenders' rehabilitation needs. As at October 2024, all CRS contracts except for accommodation services met or exceeded HMPPS's administrative targets on timeliness. HMPPS's 2024 audits of its 22 highest-value CRS contracts also show some improvements in service quality, relative to its 2022 baseline audits. HMPPS has begun monitoring data on provider-reported outcomes in response to our previous recommendations, but data quality remains poor, and HMPPS does not currently verify all outcomes achieved. In 2024-25, CRS providers reported that a third of completed referrals did not "fully achieve" intended outcomes. As part of its recommissioning programme, HMPPS plans to collect more data on whether services are achieving intended outcomes. This includes the development of a 'distance travelled' tool to measure an offender's progress (paragraphs 1.14 to 1.19).

**7 HMPPS considers continued shortages of qualified staff and staff inexperience to be major contributing factors to poor performance.** While the probation caseload has remained relatively stable post unification (around 242,000 in 2025), the proportion of higher-risk cases which can only be handled by qualified Probation Officers (POs) has increased from 12% in June 2021 to 22% in December 2024. At the same time, staffing shortages in the Probation Service have persisted in the PO grade. In March 2025, there were 5,636 full-time equivalent (FTE) POs in the Probation Service, some 79% of its target staffing level, leaving a shortfall of 1,479 POs. The proportion of inexperienced staff (with four years or less of experience) has increased by 10 percentage points since unification, from 28% in March 2021 to 38% in March 2025. HMPPS acknowledges that these factors have contributed to high staff workloads and, in turn, to poor service delivery (paragraphs 1.5, 1.6, 1.20 to 1.22 and 2.6, and Figures 3 and 7).

**8 HMPPS has implemented initiatives to improve the quality of probation, but staff shortages and a high level of change have made it difficult to realise improvements.** The Probation Service has undergone many changes over the last 10 years and has also had to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and measures MoJ introduced to ease prison capacity pressures. HMPPS introduced regional quality plans in 2022, and in 2024 it worked with probation regions to help them self-assess their performance against staffing factors to help drive improvements. However, there was a consensus among staff we spoke to that staff shortages, coupled with the high volume of change experienced by the service, have made improving quality harder (paragraphs 1.22, 2.8 and 2.11, and Figure 9).

**Figure 1**  
Overview of the Probation Service

An individual can come into contact with the Probation Service at various points in the Criminal Justice System



□ Key areas of Probation Service activity   □ Entry point into the probation system   → Flow between stages or activities  
↔ Continuous monitoring and feedback loop between practitioner and each activity

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## Figure 1 *continued*

### Overview of the Probation Service

**Notes**

- 1 The term 'out of court disposal' refers to the various ways of resolving offending without going to court, such as police issued cautions.
- 2 A pre-sentence report is an expert assessment of the nature and causes of an offender's behaviour and the risk they pose and to whom, as well as an independent recommendation of the sentencing option(s) available to the court.
- 3 The Offender Assessment System is used in England and Wales by the Probation Service to measure the risks and needs of individuals under their supervision.
- 4 Licence conditions are the set of rules individuals must follow if they are released from prison but still have a part of their sentence to serve in the community.
- 5 Probation supervision requirements, such as unpaid work or alcohol treatment requirements, are available to sentencers when imposing a community order or suspended sentence order.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Prison & Probation Service documents

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## HMPPS's work to improve the performance and resilience of probation services to 2025

**9 Despite HMPPS increasing trainee recruitment and introducing measures to improve retention since 2021, its plans were insufficient to address staffing shortfalls.** HMPPS sought to increase staff through its 2021–2024 recruitment and retention strategy. HMPPS met its targets for trainee PO recruitment up to 2024–25 and implemented several initiatives to improve retention, such as its 2022 multi-year pay deal. However, in part due to affordability and training capacity constraints, HMPPS did not set recruitment targets sufficiently high to meet the number of POs that it estimated it would require, at least in the years up to March 2025. Staff turnover has also increased, and workloads remain high. Although upon unification HMPPS sought to increase productivity through streamlining inefficient systems and processes, funding constraints meant it scaled back and delayed planned digital improvements. HMPPS acknowledges that some probation processes and systems remain inefficient and that the culture has been to respond to risk by adding processes on top of existing processes (paragraphs 2.3 to 2.10 and Figure 8).

**10 In response to high workloads, HMPPS introduced in 2022 a temporary prioritisation measure that prioritised public protection over rehabilitation; however, this did not reduce PO workloads sufficiently.** In January 2022, HMPPS introduced a prioritisation framework that allows Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) to prioritise high-risk cases and to pause some rehabilitative interventions such as accredited programmes if workload becomes too high for staff. In 2024–25, on average per month, 46 out of 108 (43%) PDUs were not delivering all mandated sentence management activities (see Figure 1, which outlines what sentence management covers). However, workloads remained high for POs (at 118% of capacity on average) who deal with higher-risk offenders (paragraphs 2.13 to 2.15 and Figures 9 and 10).

**11 HMPPS did not introduce further major changes to workload until 2024 due to a lack of clear triggers for escalating capacity risks, but has since improved its approach.** HMPPS has been monitoring and reporting probation capacity issues on its risk register since unification. However, it did not initially establish its risk appetite for capacity pressures or have clear triggers for escalating risks as workloads increased. Its approach evolved and, in March 2024, HMPPS began to establish clearer lines of escalation and governance for risks. In April 2024, HMPPS initiated 'Reset' to offset measures such as early release schemes introduced to free up prison capacity. Under Reset, practitioner contact is generally suspended in the last third of an offender's licence period, although some categories of offender, such as those assessed as 'very high risk of serious harm', are excluded from this arrangement. HMPPS's data show workloads reduced following Reset, which allowed practitioners to increase contact with 'very high risk of serious harm' cases; however, it did not sufficiently reduce workloads for POs. It found that in 10 out of 12 probation regions POs were still working on average at above 100% capacity (defined using caseload and working hours, with 100% meaning that a practitioner's capacity is fully used). In April 2025, HMPPS implemented 'Impact', a scheme to further reduce workload by ending supervision for offenders with a lower risk of reoffending and harm after 16 weeks (paragraphs 2.15 to 2.17 and Figure 9).

**12 In 2024, HMPPS's internal analysis showed it had previously significantly underestimated the number of staff required to provide sentence management tasks by approximately 34% (around 5,400 FTE staff).** In 2022, HMPPS recognised the need to review its assumptions around the time taken to complete probation activities so that it could better understand staffing needs, and it began to review these timings. In most cases, HMPPS surveyed front-line staff to find average reported timings but then adjusted some timings, for example where it judged staff could complete tasks more quickly with additional learning and development. HMPPS completed reviews of eight types of probation work between May 2023 and February 2025. It found that, in 2024, using its adjusted timings, it had underestimated the number of sentence management staff required by around 34% (around 5,400 FTE staff). Using staff-reported timings there was an underestimation of around 40% (around 6,900 FTE staff). Compared with actual staff in post as at April 2024, this suggests that the service had been operating with around only half of the staff needed to run sentence management as intended. The new timings also mean that HMPPS's staff capacity estimates are inaccurate. It told us it is currently working to update this and has commissioned an external review of its assessments (paragraphs 2.18, 2.19 and 3.16, and Figure 11).

## Securing the future resilience of the service

**13** In 2025, HMPPS estimated that, even after taking into account its plans to reduce this staffing shortfall through recruitment and some prioritisation measures, a capacity gap of 3,150 sentence management FTE staff (out of approximately 15,000 sentence management FTE staff required) would still remain in 2026-27. In early 2025, HMPPS estimated that it would have a capacity gap of around 3,900 FTE (approximately 25%) sentence management staff in 2026-27, even after its recruitment aims and prioritisation measures such as Reset. This was largely due to its updated activity timings. It later revised this down to 3,150 FTE staff in July 2025 against a target of approximately 15,000 sentence management FTE staff, which included estimated reductions from its Impact scheme and further modelling revisions. HMPPS stated that further service transformation was necessary to address this gap, and to improve performance and resilience (paragraphs 2.20 and 2.21, and Figure 11).

**14** In February 2025, HMPPS established its 'Our Future Probation Service' (OFPS) programme (the programme) to transform the service and reduce workloads by 25% overall, an innovative approach in a complex environment. The programme consists of four operational workstreams: courts; custody, pre-release and electronic monitoring; sentence management; and interventions and unpaid work. Across each workstream, HMPPS is exploring innovative ways to change the scope of the service delivered (such as which offender cohorts are supervised and for how long) and how the service is delivered (such as by streamlining processes and improving digital systems), to create more capacity. For example, it has developed an artificial intelligence transcription tool to reduce the administration burden on staff. Through a fifth Human Resources (HR) workstream, HMPPS is also looking at the efficiency, consistency of application and staff experience of HR processes, related to work-related stress absence and wellbeing in probation. The programme aims to improve the probation service's performance, increase retention and reduce staff sickness absence. HMPPS's 25% target applies to the whole service but is based on the estimated sentence management capacity gap, while work to convert activity timings for other areas is ongoing. HMPPS has had to manage several early uncertainties in the programme. For example, it had to submit Spending Review bids in April 2025, before it fully understood the likely additional probation workload arising from the Independent Sentencing Review (ISR) recommendations (published in May 2025) and subsequent legislation. Similarly, it began considering options to free up capacity before knowing the funding available (paragraphs 3.2, 3.3, 3.8 and 3.9, and Figures 12 and 14).

**15 To deliver additional capacity in time to meet increased demand from policy changes, HMPPS adopted a high-risk appetite prior to the design phase of the programme.** HMPPS initially planned to decide its new processes and digital solutions by August and to commence national rollout of all solutions from January 2026. It subsequently delayed these plans to reflect final policy decisions included in the Sentencing Bill, introduced in September 2025, which will operationalise ISR recommendations once passed into legislation. HMPPS now plans to do a staged rollout of its solutions to allow the service to cope with increases in demand from the Sentencing Act. In June 2025, HMPPS set its risk appetite for the programme as ‘open’ for all risk categories, including service disruption risks resulting from inadequate processes or technology, and the risk that the programme may not achieve the expected benefits. The ‘open’ category is the second highest on the five-point risk appetite scale, HMPPS stated that an open risk appetite means it is “willing to consider all potential delivery options and choose the one which is most likely to result in successful delivery while also providing an acceptable level of reward and value for money” (paragraphs 3.9 and 3.14, and Figure 14).

**16 HMPPS and MoJ have not fully assessed the practical consequences of taking on a high level of risk nor set clear thresholds for how much risk the service can tolerate.** HMPPS has not yet conducted a detailed assessment of what accepting a high level of risk could mean in practice, for example for front-line services, or for its aims. Nor has it yet set clear thresholds for how much risk the service can tolerate, for example how much disruption its workforce can cope with. Without these thresholds, the programme may not recognise whether it is exceeding acceptable limits, which could delay mitigating efforts (paragraph 3.15).

**17 We identified risks to the long-term resilience of the Probation Service.**

- **HMPPS does not yet know whether the totality of its proposals will free up sufficient capacity to improve performance.** HMPPS aims to reduce workloads by 25% across the service. While it has begun to estimate the impact of changes on capacity, it is currently only measuring progress against its latest estimate of the sentence management capacity gap (approximately 3,150). Further, its estimate of the discrepancy between sentence management demand and staff required may not reflect the true scale of the gap. While HMPPS used updated activity timings on sentence management to estimate staff requirements, it used timings it had adjusted from the actual times reported by its staff (see paragraph 12). Using staff-reported timings would increase the capacity gap by approximately 1,500 practitioners. HMPPS hopes that a combination of process changes it plans to implement through the programme, alongside staff development, will help to close this additional gap. HMPPS's calculations do not yet account for the impact of the Independent Review of the Criminal Courts, which HMPPS expects will further increase the probation caseload. A 2025 internal review of learning and development also stressed that HMPPS will need to free up more capacity to provide time for essential learning to increase quality. HMPPS plans to secure external review of its estimate of the capacity gap by the end of September 2025. It also plans to incorporate gaps in other areas of probation, as it completes additional modelling up to March 2026.
- **Some scope changes could carry future risks to public protection and rehabilitation, and wider government objectives such as the safer streets mission if not actively managed.** HMPPS does not expect to secure the scale of workload reductions it originally hoped from ISR recommendations and associated policy decisions, or digital and process changes. It acknowledges that this means it will need to make bolder decisions around changing the scope of probation. HMPPS aims to target resources where they can be most effective, but its evidence base is limited in some areas. For example, HMPPS does not yet know the impact of prioritisation schemes such as Reset and Impact on rehabilitation or public safety outcomes. These schemes were specifically designed to prioritise higher-risk offenders, but their long-term impact on rehabilitation and public safety has not yet been evaluated. Some scope changes will rely on lighter probation supervision and greater community support for some offenders and will require sufficient funding for CRS and third-sector organisations to ensure there is sufficient capacity to meet demand. The ISR recommendation that prisoners would be subject to electronic monitoring in the community in the second third of their sentence means that higher-risk offenders will be released. It also places more reliance on electronic monitoring, which has been dealing with backlogs (paragraphs 2.16, 2.21, 3.5, 3.6, 3.12, 3.16 and 3.17).

## Conclusion

**18** Research shows that a well-functioning probation service can reduce the significant cost of reoffending to society, estimated by MoJ at £20.9 billion a year across adult offenders, in 2024-25 prices. However, available data show that, since unification of the Probation Service in June 2021, performance has worsened, with significant staffing shortfalls and high workloads, particularly for the Probation Officer grade. HMPPS increased its recruitment of probation staff in line with its plans, but in 2024 its internal analysis indicated that it had significantly underestimated the time needed for sentence management tasks. This analysis is undergoing external review but indicates that the service had been operating with around half the staff needed for sentence management. HMPPS acknowledges that the Probation Service is currently unsustainable, requiring significant corrective action. It has made pragmatic decisions to deal with staffing shortfalls by reducing rehabilitative activity and supervision, but these have not sufficiently reduced PO workloads. Further, to avoid running out of prison places, MoJ plans to implement legislative changes that will significantly increase demands on the Probation Service.

**19** HMPPS's 'Our Future Probation Programme' is a bold and innovative approach to increase resilience. However, the significant gap between actual and required capacity and slow progress in improving productivity means the challenge it faces is huge. Furthermore, the pace of change required and nature of the changes HMPPS plans to make pose risks to the probation service's aims of public protection, rehabilitation, and the government's wider 'Safer Streets' mission, which will need to be actively managed. HMPPS, MoJ and the government more widely must urgently consider how to manage these risks and how to ensure that reducing the scope of Probation Service activity does not negatively impact on offender outcomes or increase pressure on the wider justice system.

## Recommendations

### **a To understand and effectively manage risks associated with the OFPS programme:**

- HMPPS should carry out a detailed assessment of the potential impacts of setting an 'Open' risk appetite for its OFPS programme and articulate this clearly, including seeking agreement from senior departmental staff;
- MoJ and HMPPS should agree clear risk thresholds to help manage trade-offs as the programme progresses and establish how it will measure whether it is breaching thresholds; and
- HMPPS should put contingency plans in place to mitigate any risks that materialise.

**b To minimise the change load of OFPS on staff, HMPPS should:**

- ensure it has a full understanding of how changes from OFPS and wider policy changes affect the service;
- schedule and manage the rollout of changes to minimise the change load on staff, considering the need to balance any shorter-term reactive changes and longer-term strategic solutions;
- set out a rollout schedule and training plan to communicate to staff when changes are due, and when they may need to complete any learning and development; and
- implement regular feedback and review on change implementation, to give early warning of any need to adapt plans.

**c To ensure that HMPPS frees up sufficient capacity and to improve quality, it should:**

- review the estimated capacity gap, in light of wider justice system developments, and ensure its calculations factor in any headroom needed to facilitate improvements in quality;
- put in place mechanisms to validate whether changes are achieving the estimated reductions in workload at a national level;
- where actual staff-reported activity timings exceed HMPPS's expectations for tasks, set out how it plans to support staff to reduce the time spent on those tasks, for example by process improvements, changing policy requirements or more learning and development; it should then track whether reductions are realised;
- set out contingency plans for if it does not achieve the reductions required, including any risks associated with its plans; and
- assess whether its workforce plans will deliver the additional staffing levels assumed in its calculation of the capacity gap.

**d Where MoJ and HMPPS are making significant changes to the level and depth of supervision and support for different groups they should:**

- build in robust monitoring and evaluation to assess the impact of changes in supervision and support, including whether lower- and medium-risk groups can access services that meet their needs;
- assess whether CRS providers and wider organisations have the capacity and/or funding to absorb increases in demand; and
- work with other government departments to monitor and react to any adverse impacts in other areas of government.