



REPORT

Building an effective and resilient Probation Service

Ministry of Justice/HM Prison & Probation Service

Key facts

£1.45bn

cost of running the Probation Service in 2023-24

24

241,540

number of people supervised by the Probation Service at March 2025 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

June 2021 date the Probation Service was brought back under full public control, reversing the partial privatisation of the service

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

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 $\mathfrak{L}1.45$ 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 $\mathfrak{L}20.9$ 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. 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.

¹ 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).

- 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).
- The Probation Service, some 79% of its target staffing level, leaving a shortfall of 1,479 POs. The proportion of inexperience does not proportion of inexperience of 1,479 POs. The proportion of inexperience does not proportion of inexperience 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).