



REPORT

Building an effective and resilient Probation Service

Ministry of Justice/HM Prison & Probation Service



We are the UK's
independent
public spending
watchdog.

We support Parliament
in holding government
to account and we
help improve public
services through our
high-quality audits.

The National Audit Office (NAO) scrutinises public spending for Parliament and is independent of government and the civil service. We help Parliament hold government to account and we use our insights to help people who manage and govern public bodies improve public services.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), Gareth Davies, is an Officer of the House of Commons and leads the NAO. We audit the financial accounts of departments and other public bodies. We also examine and report on the value for money of how public money has been spent.

In 2024, the NAO's work led to a positive financial impact through reduced costs, improved service delivery, or other benefits to citizens, of £5.3 billion. This represents around £53 for every pound of our net expenditure.



National Audit Office

Building an effective and resilient Probation Service

Ministry of Justice/HM Prison & Probation Service

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed on 22 October 2025

This report has been prepared under Section 6 of the
National Audit Act 1983 for presentation to the House of
Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act

Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

14 October 2025



Value for money reports

Our value for money reports examine government expenditure in order to form a judgement on whether value for money has been achieved. We also make recommendations to public bodies on how to improve public services.

The material featured in this document is subject to National Audit Office (NAO) copyright. The material may be copied or reproduced for non-commercial purposes only, namely reproduction for research, private study or for limited internal circulation within an organisation for the purpose of review.

Copying for non-commercial purposes is subject to the material being accompanied by a sufficient acknowledgement, reproduced accurately, and not being used in a misleading context. To reproduce NAO copyright material for any other use, you must contact copyright@nao.org.uk. Please tell us who you are, the organisation you represent (if any) and how and why you wish to use our material. Please include your full contact details: name, address, telephone number and email.

Please note that the material featured in this document may not be reproduced for commercial gain without the NAO's express and direct permission and that the NAO reserves its right to pursue copyright infringement proceedings against individuals or companies who reproduce material for commercial gain without our permission.

Links to external websites were valid at the time of publication of this report. The National Audit Office is not responsible for the future validity of the links.



Contents

Key facts 4

Summary

Introduction 5

Part One

Probation Service performance 17

Part Two

HM Prison & Probation Service's approach to improving the performance and resilience of the service post unification 31

Part Three

HM Prison & Probation Service's current plans to secure the long-term sustainability of the service 45

Appendix One

Our audit approach 56

Appendix Two

Commissioned Rehabilitative Services insights 59

This report can be found on the National Audit Office website at www.nao.org.uk

If you need a version of this report in an alternative format for accessibility reasons, or any of the figures in a different format, contact the NAO at enquiries@nao.org.uk

The National Audit Office study team consisted of:

Darya Bordbar, Robert Carthy, Kemi Duroshola, Oliver Jeffries and Karen Ng, under the direction of Jenny George.

For further information about the National Audit Office please contact:

National Audit Office
Press Office
157-197 Buckingham Palace Road
Victoria
London
SW1W 9SP

 020 7798 7400

 www.nao.org.uk

 @NAOorguk

Key facts

£1.45bn	241,540	5,636
cost of running the Probation Service in 2023-24	number of people supervised by the Probation Service at March 2025	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
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.¹ 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).

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

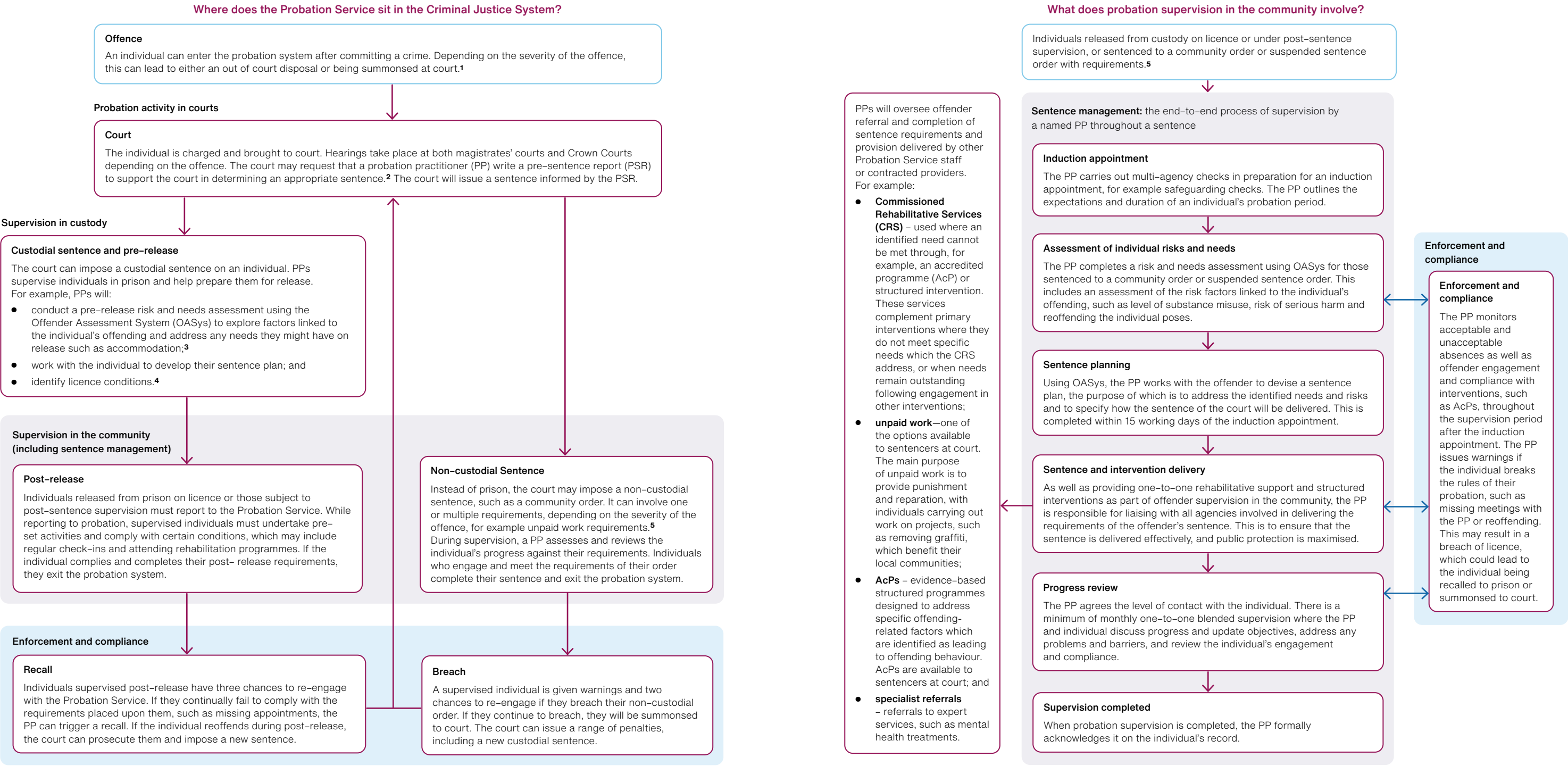


Figure 1 *continued*

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

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.

Part One

Probation Service performance

1.1 This part of the report sets out:

- the Probation Service's aims and history;
- the performance of the Probation Service and its Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) contracts to support offender rehabilitation in England and Wales; and
- HM Prison & Probation Service's (HMPPS's) understanding of the drivers of poor performance.

Overview of the Probation Service in England and Wales

1.2 The Probation Service is part of HMPPS, an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). It aims to protect the public and reduce reoffending through the effective rehabilitation of offenders. It is responsible for providing sentencing advice to courts and for supervising offenders serving custodial sentences in prison, as well as offenders in the community who have been sentenced to a community order or suspended sentence order or who have been released from custody on licence.² There are 12 probation regions across England and Wales, each led by a regional probation director. In 2023-24, HMPPS spent £1.45 billion on the Probation Service, 27% of HMPPS's total net expenditure. Reoffending is costly to society. Updated analysis by MoJ, reflecting 2024-25 prices, estimates that the economic and social cost of reoffending across adult offenders has risen to £20.9 billion a year.

1.3 The probation workforce includes Probation Officers (POs) and Probation Service Officers (PSOs) who do most of the front-line work with offenders and are known as probation practitioners. POs deal with medium- to high-risk cases and are required to complete a professional qualification in probation (PQiP). PSOs manage low- and medium-risk cases. Trainee POs spend some time carrying out PSO roles and also study for the PQiP, which takes up to 27 months (30 months part-time) to complete. Administrative staff support probation practitioners, and Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) oversee practitioners' work.

² 'Licence period' refers to the period in which a prisoner is released from prison to serve the remainder of their sentence in the community. Offenders subject to post-release licence must adhere to specific conditions as part of their licence.

Unification of Probation Services

1.4 In June 2021, HMPPS unified probation services in England and Wales, creating a single Probation Service under full public control and reversing its previous reforms. Its 2014 Transforming Rehabilitation reforms had split probation services into two: private sector-led Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) to oversee low- to medium-risk offenders and the National Probation Service (NPS) to supervise primarily high-risk offenders. We reported on the 2014 reforms twice, with our 2019 report *Transforming Rehabilitation: Progress review*, concluding that the reforms had achieved poor value for money for the taxpayer.³ Through unification, HMPPS aimed to establish a sustainable model for probation that could address inefficiencies and reduce reoffending, set out in a target operating model. Under the unified model, the Probation Service carries out sentence management, the end-to-end supervision of an offender by a probation practitioner, for offenders of all risk levels. It also oversees interventions to rehabilitate offenders, including accredited programmes (AcPs), as well as unpaid work (UPW).^{4,5} HMPPS also uses Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) contracts to complement sentence management activity by supporting offenders' rehabilitative needs.

Probation Service caseload and workforce

1.5 Since unification, the Probation Service caseload has remained relatively stable, aside from a temporary dip due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the workload involves offender supervision in the community, including those sentenced to a community order or suspended sentence order and those released from custody on licence (**Figure 2**). As of March 2025, there were 166,853 offenders under supervision in the community, more than two-thirds (69%) of the Probation Service's total caseload of 241,540.

1.6 However, the proportion of high-risk cases, which can only be managed by trained POs has increased. As at December 2024, of offenders in the community where the risk level was known, 22% (36,413) were rated as high and very high risk of serious harm, compared with 12% (19,399) in June 2021 (**Figure 3** on pages 20 and 21).⁶ One reason for this increase in high-risk offenders may be because the caseload composition has changed. This is due to several factors, for example changes in the types of crimes committed, and judges and magistrates giving fewer community sentences.

3 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Transforming Rehabilitation*, Session 2015-16, HC 951, and Comptroller and Auditor General, *Transforming Rehabilitation: Progress review*, Session 2017-2019, HC 1986, National Audit Office, March 2019.

4 Accredited programmes are evidence-based structured programmes designed to address specific offending-related factors that are identified as leading to offending behaviour.

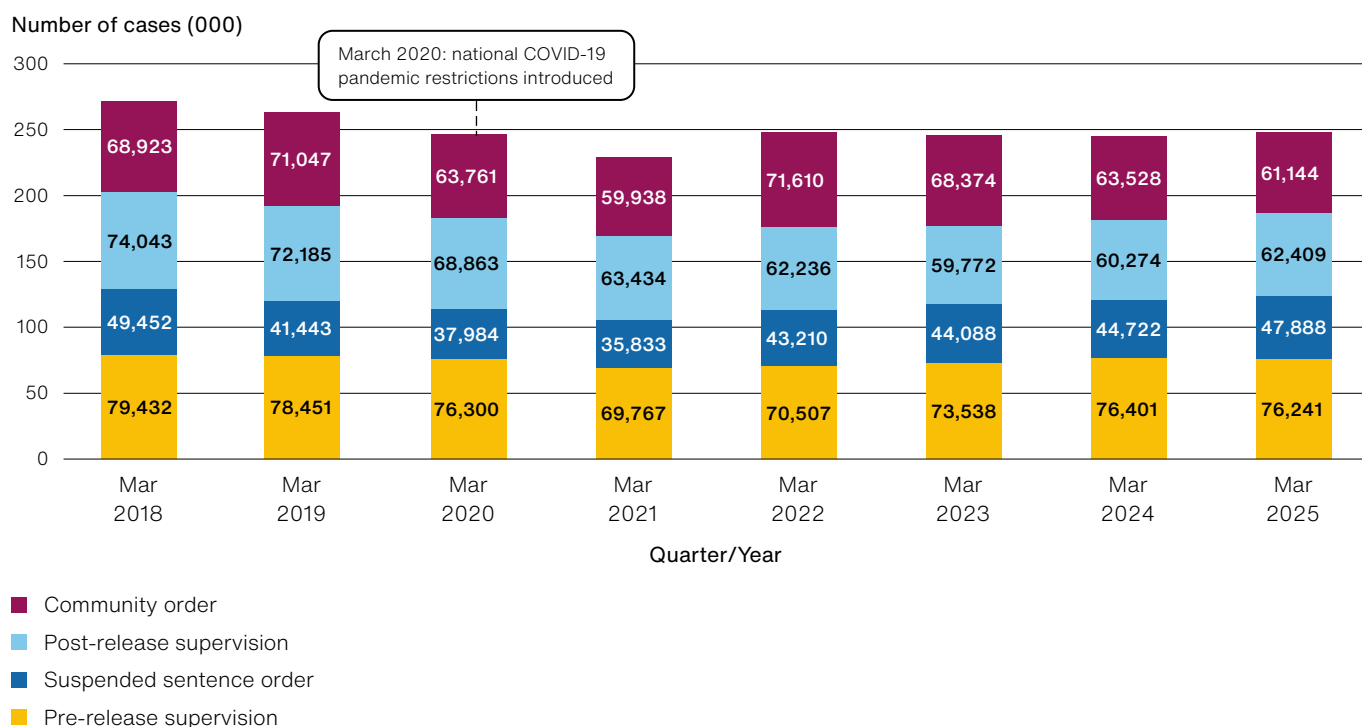
5 Unpaid work is one of the options available to sentencers at court. The main purpose of unpaid work is to provide punishment and reparation, with individuals carrying out work on projects that benefit their local communities, such as removing graffiti.

6 Data are based on HMPPS management information, which has not yet been through its quality assurance processes.

Figure 2

Number of offenders supervised by the Probation Service in England and Wales between March 2018 and March 2025

Offenders supervised in the community (which includes those on a community order, suspended sentence order and post-release supervision) account for the majority of the Probation Service's supervision caseload



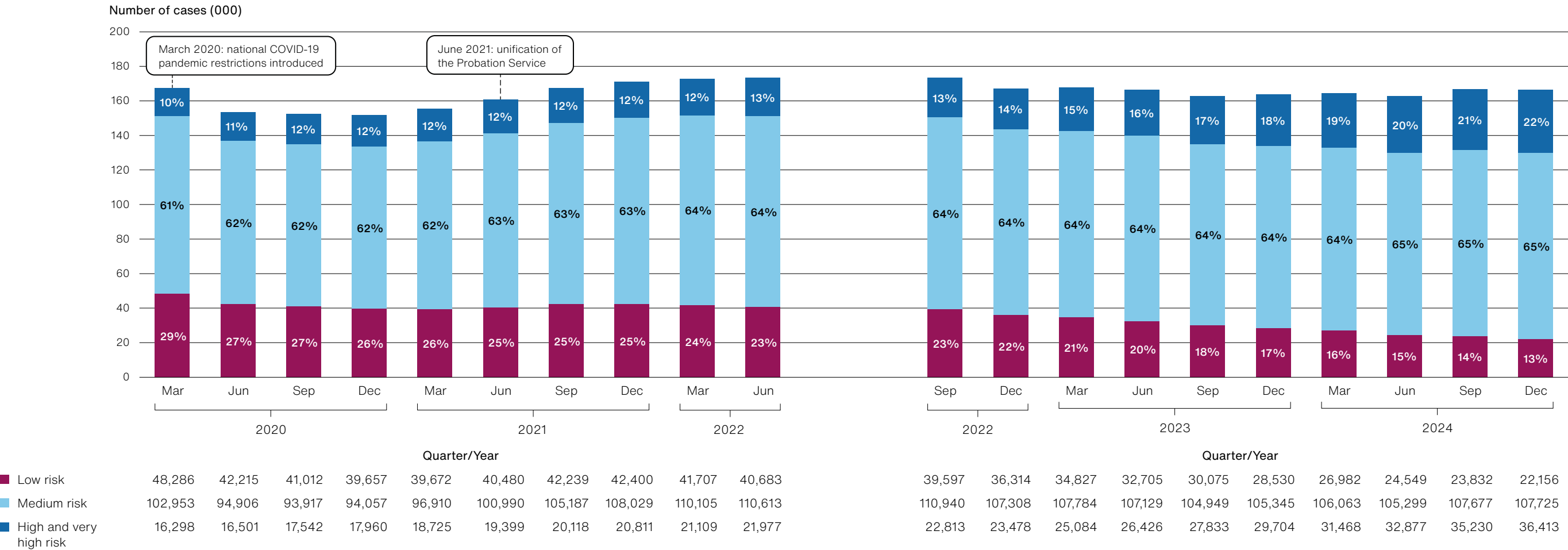
Notes

- 1 The data in this chart do not sum to the total Probation Service caseload. This is because the total Probation Service caseload, published as part of official statistics, counts each individual only once per supervision type and in the overall total, even if they are subject to multiple types. In contrast, the data presented in this chart may include multiple entries for the same individual if they fall under more than one supervision type.
- 2 The data presented reflects the Probation Service caseload at the end of each quarter of the year.
- 3 A community order is a sentence for serious offences that do not require prison, aiming to reduce reoffending by addressing the root causes of behaviour. It can include requirements like unpaid work, curfews, treatment programmes, and restrictions on travel or access to certain places.
- 4 A suspended sentence order is served in the community instead of in prison, provided the offender does not commit another offence and complies with certain conditions, such as curfews or treatment programmes. If the offender breaches these conditions or reoffends, they may have to serve the original prison sentence along with any new sentence. Offenders sentenced to suspended sentence orders without requirements attached are not supervised by the Probation Service — there are no requirements for the offender to meet, other than to not commit a further offence. The data in this chart exclude offenders sentenced to suspended sentence orders without requirements as these individuals are not supervised by the Probation Service.
- 5 Pre-release supervision involves planning and support to help offenders in prison prepare for life in the community. It includes assessing risks and needs, maintaining community ties, addressing rehabilitation goals, and providing access to services such as housing, employment and legal advice, tailored to each offender's needs.
- 6 During post-release supervision, offenders on licence or those subject to post-sentence supervision, report to probation practitioners. Probation practitioners ensure offenders comply with conditions such as attending regular appointments and participating in rehabilitation programmes.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Prison & Probation Service Offender Management Statistics quarterly

Figure 3
Number and proportion of cases supervised by the Probation Service in the community by risk of serious harm in England and Wales between March 2020 and December 2024

The proportion of ‘low risk’ cases decreased by 16 percentage points from 29% in March 2020 to 13% in December 2024, while the proportions of ‘medium risk’ and ‘high risk’ and ‘very high risk’ cases have increased by 4 and 12 percentage points, respectively, during the same period



Notes

1 We have combined the number of ‘high risk’ and ‘very high risk’ cases for presentation purposes.

2 Caseload includes post-release supervision (licence and post-sentence supervision) and court orders (community orders and suspended sentence orders), excluding suspended sentence orders with no requirements.

3 Percentages represent the proportion of cases in a particular risk level of the total caseload, excluding cases with an unknown risk level.

4 Figures are based on unpublished HMPPS management information, which has not yet been through its quality assurance processes.

5 Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Probation Service performance

1.7 The Probation Service's overall aims are of public protection and reducing reoffending. However, reoffending is complex and affected by a wide range of factors. These include external influences such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and levels of police activity. Underlying drivers including poverty levels and individual needs, such as access to stable housing, can also increase the risk of reoffending. The Probation Service is responsible for addressing some of these needs, while others, such as employment support, are addressed through wider public services and the third sector. This means it is not possible to directly determine the impact of probation activity. Nonetheless, data suggest a deterioration in outcomes since unification.

- **The reoffending rate for adults supervised by the Probation Service, either released from custody or starting a court order, has increased.** The adult reoffending rate for these cohorts increased by 5 percentage points, from 31% in April to June 2021 to 36% in July to September 2023. The average number of reoffences per reoffender also increased by 31% (from 3.8 to 5.0 reoffences) across the same period.⁷
- **The number of prisoners recalled to prison is at an all-time high.** At March 2025, the recall prison population was 13,583 – 15% of the total prison population. This is a 49% increase since June 2021.
- **The number of offenders charged with a Serious Further Offence (SFO) while under probation supervision has increased.** In 2023-24, the Probation Service submitted 770 SFO notifications – 55% more than in 2020-21 and the highest level reported to date.⁸

1.8 HMPPS uses its own performance metrics as proxy indicators of whether the Probation Service is meeting its aims. This is supported by HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) research in 2023, which indicated that high-quality supervision by a probation practitioner significantly improved sentence completion rates and reduced reoffending.

⁷ There were large decreases in the reoffending rate for the pandemic-affected cohorts between October and December 2018, and between October and December 2020. This pandemic-related decline then began to reverse up to the July to September 2022 cohort, before appearing to increase in the most recent quarters.

⁸ There was a slight decrease in the number of SFO notifications submitted by the Probation Service in 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.9 HMPPS's data show that performance has worsened since unification. HMPPS uses a range of metrics to measure Probation Service performance at each stage of supervision against its target operating model (**Figure 4** overleaf). HMPPS has increased the number of metrics it monitors over time. In 2024-25, it only met seven of its 27 (26%) performance targets, a decrease of 24 percentage points since July 2021 to March 2022 in the proportion of targets met (**Figure 5** on page 25).⁹ In some instances, this is due to changes HMPPS has made to its performance targets across various years. Performance for UPW, which aims to be punitive and community-focused, and AcPs, which support the rehabilitation of offenders, were particularly poor, partly due to the accumulation of backlogs during the pandemic. In 2024-25, 63% of offenders completed their UPW requirements within 12 months, against a target of 75%. Offenders who do not complete their UPW on time must return to court for an extension, adding to the existing caseload. Only 53% of offenders completed their AcP, against a target of 60% (Figure 4). HMPPS estimates that, between April 2021 and March 2025, around 17,000 offender sentences have expired with the offender not commencing the required AcP, despite many being mandated by a court. However, despite not meeting HMPPS targets, performance has improved across some metrics when compared with the previous financial year. For example, performance against pre-release sentence plans for enhanced cases increased by 10 percentage points, from 28% in 2022-23 to 37% in 2024-25.

1.10 Poor data quality may undermine HMPPS's performance reporting in some instances. In February 2025 an MoJ assurance exercise on the timeliness of risk management plans for sections of recall reports revealed that performance had been overstated by around 16 percentage points in January 2024 when compared with August 2023 data. MoJ has since redacted these data from its published performance statistics and is carrying out data quality assurance exercises on its other metrics.

⁹ In April 2024, the Probation Service introduced a change in practice known as 'Probation Reset', where probation practitioner engagement is suspended in the last third of an individual's sentence. As a result, HMPPS has recorded data from May 2024 for some metrics using a revised 'Reset' methodology.

Figure 4

Examples of HM Prison & Probation Service's (HMPPS's) 2024-25 performance metrics for the Probation Service

HMPPS has several metrics against which it measures how well the Probation Service is functioning at key stages of sentence management

Stage	Metric	Annual performance April 2024 to March 2025	Annual target April 2024 to March 2025	Difference (percentage points)
		(%)	(%)	
Induction appointment	The percentage of individuals under a community sentence who have an in person appointment, either in office or by home visit, arranged to take place no later than five business days after being sentenced	94	95	-1
Sentence planning	The percentage of individuals on a community sentence or released from custody on licence for whom a sentence plan is completed by the probation practitioner within 15 business days after attendance at their first appointment	87	95	-8
Sentence and intervention delivery	The percentage of unpaid work (UPW) requirements that have had UPW arranged by the Probation Service to start within 15 business days of the sentence date of that requirement	71	80	-9
	The percentage of accredited programmes (AcPs) started by eligible individuals after being sentenced or released from custody	86	90	-4
Progress review	The percentage of individuals in the community and supervised over the whole of the relevant month, who are offered at least one in-person appointment in each calendar month	90	95	-5
Enforcement and compliance	The percentage of successful completions of UPW requirements within 12 months of the individual's original sentence date where the individual is subject to an order, such as a community sentence, that contains an UPW requirement	63	75	-12
	The percentage of positive completions by eligible individual of an AcP, for example programmes delivered as part of the individual's licence condition	53	60	-7
	Successful completions of rehabilitative activities, such as AcPs, where the terminated cases are convicted of a sexual offence	63	70	-7

Note

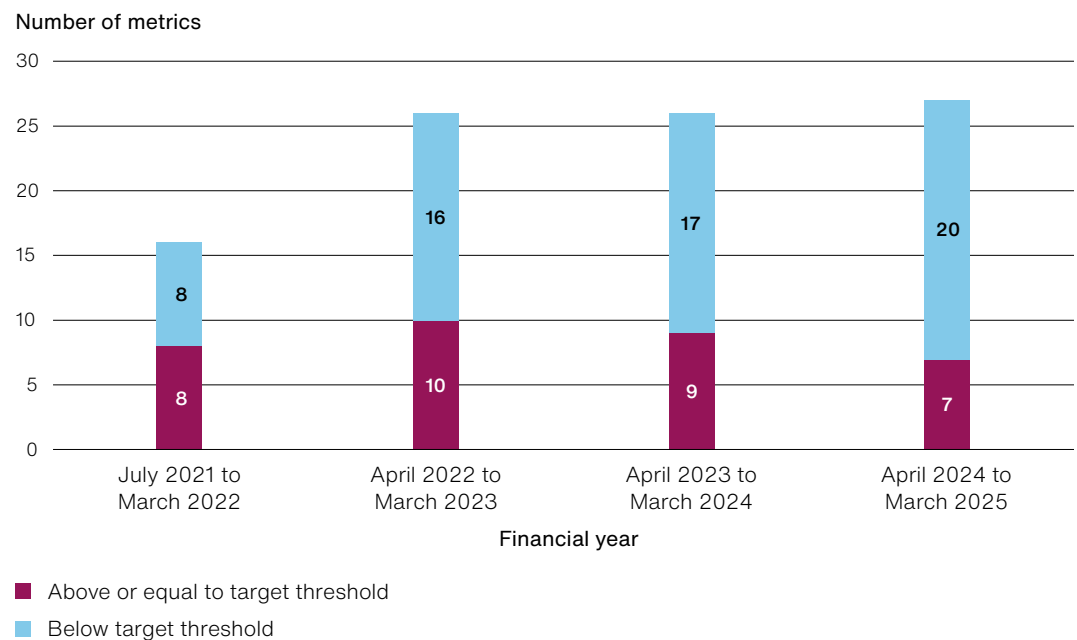
- 1 This is not an exhaustive list of the metrics HMPPS monitors to assess the performance of the Probation Service. Between April 2024 and March 2025, HMPPS's performance framework included 27 performance metrics and accompanying targets that it measured for at least six months of the financial year.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Prison & Probation Service annual Community Performance data

Figure 5

Probation Service performance against HM Prison & Probation Service's (HMPPS's) performance framework metrics in England and Wales between July 2021 and March 2025

In 2024-25, HMPPS met or exceeded targets only for 26% (seven out of 27) of its performance framework metrics, compared with 50% (eight out of 16) between July 2021 and March 2022^{1,2}

**Notes**

- 1 HMPPS monitors Probation Service performance against its performance framework, which includes a range of service process, output and outcome metrics aligned with the unified target operating model. Metrics include, for example, the percentage of individuals in the community and supervised over the whole of the relevant month, who are offered at least one in-person appointment in each calendar month, and the proportion of individuals in employment at six months post release for custodial sentences.
- 2 HMPPS implemented its performance framework for the unified Probation Service in July 2021. Therefore, data for the 2021-22 financial year do not include the months April to June 2021.
- 3 Each metric has a performance target set by HMPPS. For a small number of metrics, targets may differ over years or between probation regions due to variation between the benchmarked performance and the end state target – in these circumstances, HMPPS does not expect probation regions to deliver services to the level indicated by the end state target from the outset.
- 4 HMPPS has increased the number of metrics it monitors between 2021-22 and 2024-25.
- 5 Between April 2024 and March 2025, HMPPS's performance framework included 27 performance metrics and accompanying targets. In April 2024, the Probation Service introduced a change in practice known as probation 'Reset', where probation practitioner engagement is suspended in the last third of an individual's sentence. As a result, from May 2024 onwards, HMPPS recorded data for some metrics using a revised 'Reset' methodology. We have therefore included data for metrics that were measured for at least six months of the 2024-25 financial year. Of these, HMPPS measured 19 out of 27 of its 2024-25 metrics for the full financial year.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Prison & Probation Service annual Community Performance data

1.11 HMIP's 2024 inspection data suggest that quality may have worsened since unification. It rated a lower proportion of cases as adequate quality across each stage of sentence management, compared with CRC and NPS data for the same regions in 2018-19, (although there were some minor changes to the inspection methodology in this period) (**Figure 6** on pages 27 and 28).

1.12 HMIP's data suggest that there have been particular deteriorations in practitioners' work to adequately manage risk of harm and in the delivery of rehabilitative services such as drug and accommodation support. In 2024, HMIP found that:

- probation practitioners were adequately assessing risk of harm in 28% of cases, compared with 60% in 2018-19; and
- on average, the percentage of cases receiving sufficient support across all services was 28%, a decrease of 18 percentage points from 46% in 2018-19.¹⁰

1.13 HMPPS's own audits also show that sentence management quality has remained poor post unification, particularly around risk management. Between 2021-22 and 2023-24, HMPPS consistently rated overall service delivery as 'amber/red' in its sentence management quality audits, indicating the service was not meeting good standards in "some regards". Some areas are poorer than others. For example, in 2023-24, HMPPS rated the quality of risk management plans as 'red' in 38% of cases reviewed, meaning these were "failing" to meet good standards in "significant areas". Reasons for this included probation practitioners not including case-specific risks such as safeguarding in risk management plans, which would trigger actions such as recall if risks escalated.

Performance of Commissioned Rehabilitative Services

Performance of CRS provision

1.14 Ahead of unification, HMPPS awarded 110 CRS contracts worth between £242 million and £267 million to organisations, mainly third sector, to provide services that help to rehabilitate offenders, complementing sentence management activity undertaken by the Probation Service. The contracts initially covered accommodation; employment, training and education; personal wellbeing; and tailored services for women.¹¹ HMPPS has since awarded a further 28 contracts, worth between £60 million and £82 million, some of which were awarded to support offenders with finance, debt and benefits, and dependency and recovery. Probation practitioners can draw on these contracts to support offenders on a community order or suspended sentence order, or on licence and post-sentence supervision.

¹⁰ HMIP has implemented several methodology changes to its probation inspections since 2018, which limits the robustness of direct comparison across years. This includes changes to the spread of Probation Delivery Units and Probation Service regions inspected in 2018-19 versus 2024.

¹¹ In March 2024, HM Prisons & Probation Service decided to allow its employment, training and education contracts to lapse to bridge a £5 million to £15 million funding shortfall for planned Community Rehabilitative Services

Figure 6

Pre- and post-unification comparison of HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) sentence management quality data for the Probation Service in England and Wales

The proportion of inspected cases judged by HMIP as of 'sufficient quality' has worsened between 2018-19 and 2024 across all key quality questions

Proportion of cases judged by HMIP to be as of 'sufficient quality' (%)

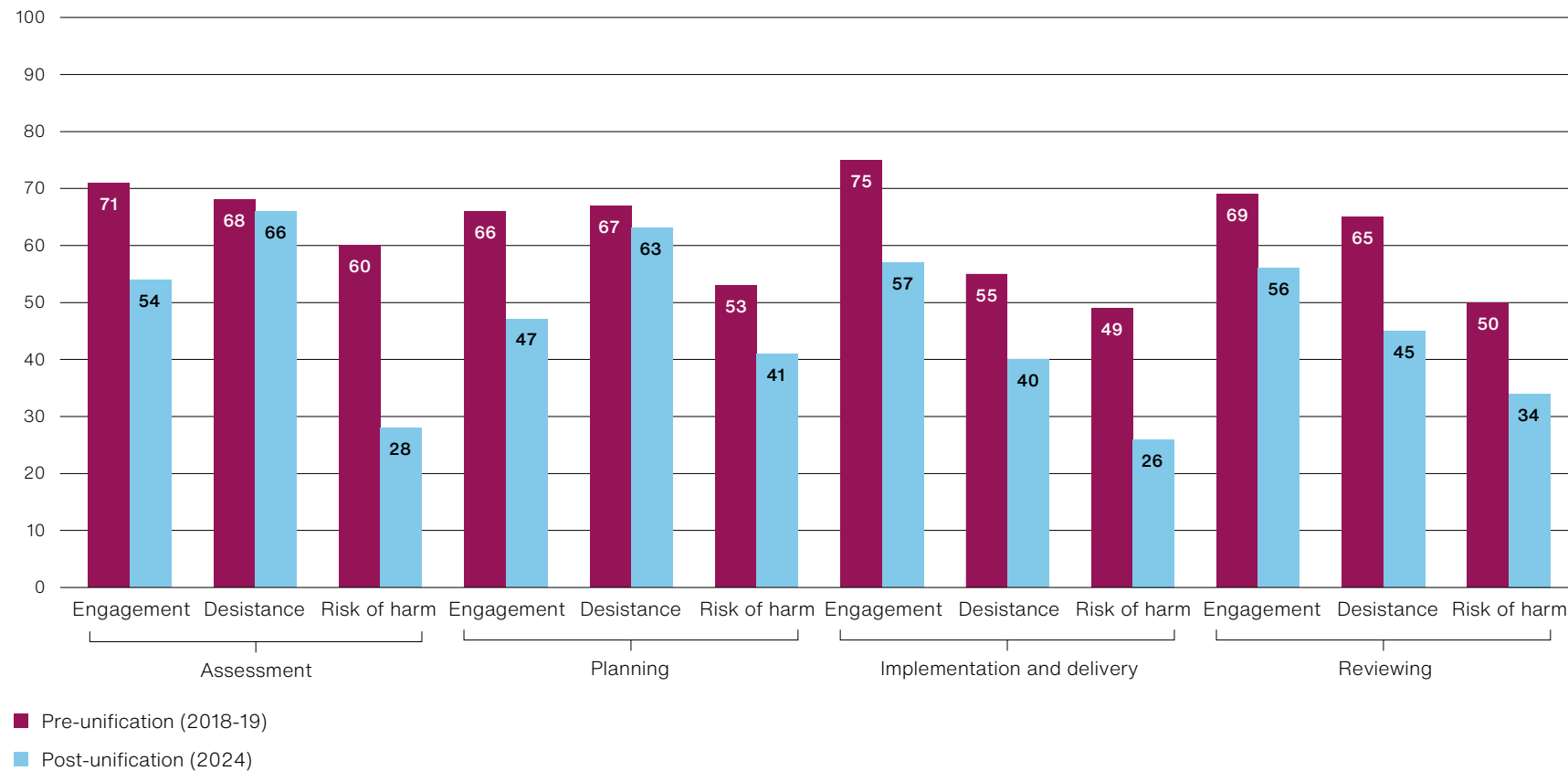


Figure 6 *continued*

Pre- and post-unification comparison of HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) sentence management quality data for the Probation Service in England and Wales

Notes

- 1 HMIP has implemented several methodology changes to its probation inspections since 2018 which limits the robustness of direct comparison across years. This includes changes to the spread of Probation Delivery Units and Probation Service regions inspected in 2018-19 versus 2024.
- 2 Engagement refers to the extent to which probation practitioners consider the individual needs and characteristics of people on probation.
- 3 Desistance relates to the support and help offered by the Probation Service to people on probation who have problems related to their offending.
- 4 Risk of harm refers to how effectively the Probation Service understands and manages the risk posed by people on probation to known victims and potential victims.
- 5 Assessment is the structured process of evaluating a supervised individual's risks, needs, and strengths to inform decision-making and support effective intervention planning.
- 6 Planning is the collaborative process of setting sequenced, and measurable objectives based on the individual's assessed risks, needs, and strengths to guide supervision and interventions that support desistance and manage potential harm.
- 7 Implementation and delivery refers to the delivery of planned interventions that address the supervised individual's risks, needs, and strengths, promote compliance, and support desistance through positive relationships with a probation practitioner.
- 8 Reviewing is the ongoing process of evaluating an individual's progress, updating assessments, and adapting plans in collaboration with the supervised individual to reflect changes in their risks, needs, strengths, and circumstances, while also recognising and reinforcing their achievements.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Inspectorate of Probation inspection data

1.15 HMPPS currently has two administrative performance metrics to assess CRS contract performance, timeliness of assessment appointments and start of interventions, for which it holds providers to account. As at October 2024, all contracts met or exceeded targets, except for accommodation contracts. HMPPS also has two quality metrics for CRS contracts, focused on the quality of intervention delivery and provider liaison with the Probation Service, against which it measures only 22 of its higher-value contracts. Performance between baseline audits in 2022 and 2024 suggests that the quality of CRS provision in these contracts has also improved slightly since our 2023 report on *Improving resettlement support for prison leavers to reduce reoffending*.¹²

Improving understanding of CRS outcomes

1.16 Our 2023 report found that HMPPS could not demonstrate that its CRS contracts were making a positive difference to offenders, as it did not systematically monitor all providers' activities or offender outcomes. We recommended that HMPPS consider revising its approach in its future contracts to enable providers to systematically report on outcomes achieved for offenders and, where appropriate, to verify providers' reporting by validating supporting evidence.

¹² Comptroller and Auditor General, *Improving resettlement support for prison leavers to reduce reoffending*, Session 2022-23, HC 1282, National Audit Office, May 2023.

1.17 HMPPS has since begun to collect some data on offender outcomes reported by CRS providers, but data quality remains poor. In 2024-25, the Probation Service made 151,486 referrals to CRS across all contracts, 38% of which were accommodation referrals. Around half (58%) of the referrals resulted in an offender starting an intervention, and CRS providers reported that a third (33%) of completed referrals did not achieve the intended outcome. Further, HMPPS does not currently verify all outcomes achieved. In its 2023 audit of a sample of cases, HMPPS found some inaccuracies in providers' reporting of outcomes, highlighting that, in some instances, providers had overstated progress.

1.18 Probation practitioners and CRS providers who we spoke to highlighted some concerns regarding the effectiveness of current CRS contracts. For example, some probation staff told us they did not think accommodation contracts were providing maximum value, as CRS providers are not contracted to fill in the relevant local authority housing forms. Some staff also felt that the objectives of the contracts were unclear. HMPPS has begun to recommission its CRS contracts and intends to award its men's contracts in October 2026, to take effect from March 2027. Given HMPPS's recommissioning timeline, we provided advance feedback on the CRS contracts based on our Managing commercial lifecycle good practice guide (see Appendix Two).¹³

1.19 HMPPS plans to improve its performance framework for assessing its future CRS contracts. HMPPS intends to continue to routinely monitor service delivery through administrative performance measures, which it expects will drive improvements to performance and outcomes. However, it also aims to collect more data on whether services are achieving intended outcomes, for example whether an offender has secured accommodation. It plans to develop a 'distance travelled' tool to assess the impact that a CRS provider has on an offender's needs. It will also use these data to inform any decisions on terminating contracts if CRS providers were to significantly underperform.

HMPPS's understanding of the drivers of performance in the Probation Service

1.20 HMPPS has sought to understand the factors affecting Probation Service performance. It recognises several important drivers such as changes in the profile of offenders supervised, significant changes and uncertainty as probation practitioners transitioned into the unified service, and a high volume of policy changes. However, it considers that staffing-related factors, including staff shortages and inexperience, are leading to heavy workloads and burnout for staff.

¹³ National Audit Office, *Managing the commercial lifecycle: Good practice guide*, February 2025.

1.21 The unified probation service inherited severe staffing shortages from the NPS and CRCs. These shortfalls meant that practitioners had high caseloads, negatively impacting staff retention. Staffing shortages have persisted post unification, particularly in the qualified PO grade. The proportion of less experienced staff has also increased: the proportion of POs with four years' service or less has risen by 10 percentage points (from 28% in March 2021 to 38% in March 2025) since unification. This is partly due to the impact of unifying the service and to earlier transforming rehabilitation reforms that resulted in the loss of qualified and experienced staff.

1.22 HMPPS acknowledges that high workloads driven by staff shortages and inexperience have significantly contributed to poor service delivery, but has found that other staffing factors are also important. In March 2023, HMPPS completed an evidence review, which identified nine factors affecting performance, including several related to staffing. In addition to staff levels and staff experience, the analysis highlighted the importance of factors such as effective leadership and a learning culture. In 2024, HMPPS worked with probation regions to help them self-assess their performance against these staffing factors to help drive improvements.

Part Two

HM Prison & Probation Service's approach to improving the performance and resilience of the service post unification

2.1 This part of the report sets out:

- HM Prison & Probation Service's (HMPPS's) efforts to improve the resilience of probation services and why this has not been sufficient to address continued performance issues outlined in Part One; and
- HMPPS's case for further transformation of the service.

Improving the resilience of the service

2.2 Since unification, HMPPS has sought to improve the Probation Service by increasing staff capacity and through initiatives to improve performance and productivity, including digital and process improvements. However, the following factors detracted from its performance.

- Recruitment and retention not in line with assessed need.
- Insufficient progress on productivity.
- High level of system change making it difficult to drive meaningful quality improvements.
- Weaknesses in risk identification and management.
- Lack of accurate understanding of probation activity timings.

Initiatives to increase staff capacity

2.3 In April 2021, HMPPS launched its 2021–2024 recruitment and retention strategy to address staffing challenges across probation. In the strategy, HMPPS made several commitments, which included closing the gap between actual and target staffing across grades and meeting the needs and expectations of staff to retain talent. It reiterated its commitment to attracting and retaining staff in its *Probation Workforce Strategy (2023–2025)*, published in February 2023. Overall, full-time equivalent (FTE) staffing levels have increased by 20% (from 17,777 to 21,396) between June 2021 and March 2025, with several other grades, including Probation Service Officers, also meeting or nearing their target staffing, except Probation Officers (POs) (**Figure 7**).¹⁴

2.4 HMPPS has set specific commitments to recruit more trainee POs, reflecting where workloads were particularly high. There were 4,457 POs as at June 2021. HMPPS aimed to recruit 1,500 in 2021–22 and 2022–23, 500 in 2023–24, and 1,000 in 2024–25. The Lord Chancellor has also committed to recruiting a further 1,300 trainees in 2025–26. HMPPS met its annual recruitment targets for trainees up to 2024–25. It also implemented several initiatives to improve retention, such as a multi-year staff pay deal in 2022 and regional ‘retention tool kits’, to support regions to address local retention challenges.

2.5 HMPPS’s recruitment targets for trainee POs were not sufficient to address shortfalls against PO target staffing up to at least March 2025, without other changes to increase productivity (**Figure 8** on page 34). This is partly because trainees cannot take on a PO workload until qualified, and it can take up to 27 months (30 months part-time) to complete the qualification. In addition, HMPPS’s PO target staffing figures for the Probation Service increased each year, with a 16% increase between March 2023 and March 2025. However, even these targets were lower than HMPPS assessed were required, as it modelled required staffing and then set targets based on affordability. For example, in 2023–24, HMPPS set its target staffing levels at 95% of the staffing level it had calculated to be necessary. Affordability aside, HMPPS also explained that constraints around organisational capacity meant the number of trainees it could support was limited.

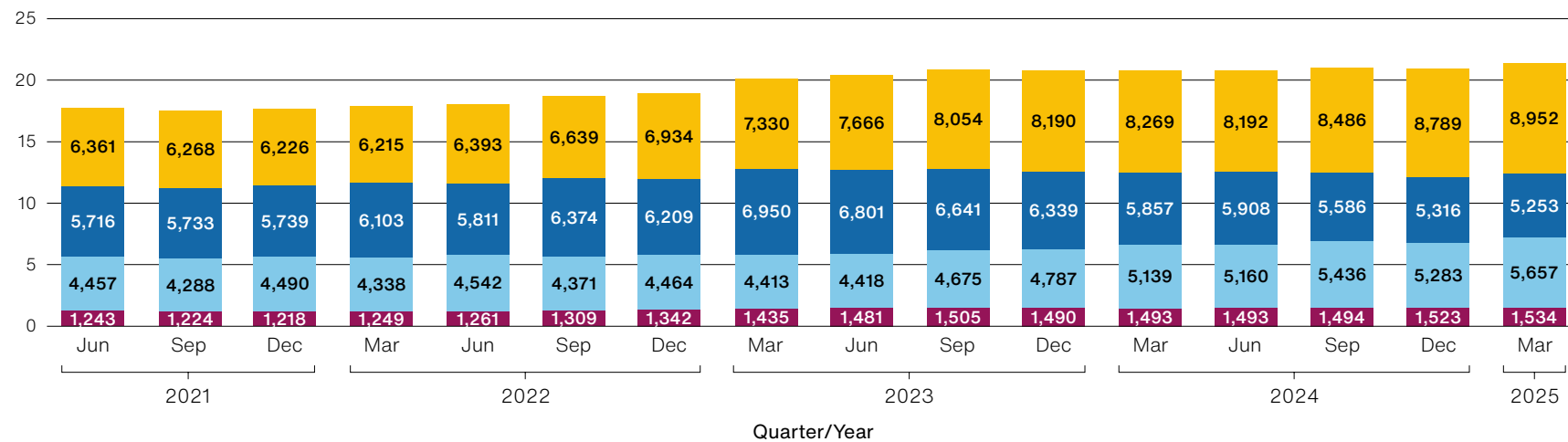
¹⁴ A small number of staff in Probation Service grades work in other parts of HMPPS, and a small number of staff in the Probation Service are not assigned Probation Service grades. Therefore, the figures for Probation Service grades do not represent the total staff in the Probation Service.

Figure 7

Number of staff in the Probation Service in England and Wales between March 2020 and March 2025

Overall full-time equivalent staffing levels have increased by 20% since unification, from 17,777 in June 2021 to 21,396 in March 2025

Number of staff (000's)



- Senior Probation Officer
- Probation Officer
- Probation Services Officer
- Other staff

Notes

- 1 'Other staff' consists of Bands A to D staff, other Bands 1-6 staff, and other staff from the Probation Service or National Probation Service who do not fall into the above categories.
- 2 Trainee Probation Officers are counted towards the Probation Services Officer numbers.
- 3 A small number of staff in Probation Service grades work in other parts of HM Prison & Probation Service, and a small number of staff in the Probation Service are not assigned Probation Service grades. Therefore, the figures for Probation Service grades do not represent the total staff in the Probation Service.
- 4 In late June 2021, more than 7,000 staff from private sector Community Rehabilitation Companies came together with National Probation Service (NPS) probation staff already in the public sector in the new Probation Service. In the year ending March 2021, there were 11,246 probation staff in the NPS.

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

Figure 8

Estimated number of Probation Officers (POs) in post against actual and target POs in post

HM Prison & Probation Service's (HMPPS's) recruitment plans would not have been sufficient to address PO shortfalls up to at least March 2025 without other changes to increase productivity; our analysis assumes that trainee POs qualify two financial years after they start their training

**Notes**

- 1 HMPPS set a target of 5,216 for March 2022; however, this was an interim position following unification and used a methodology that was not comparable.
- 2 HMPPS adjusted targets for affordability and operational constraints, so targets do not represent the full scale of staff required.
- 3 Our analysis assumes that trainees qualify two financial years after they start their training, which takes up to 27 months (30 months part-time). This may not exactly predict which year trainees qualify into.
- 4 We have assumed that in the year ending 31 March 2020 HMPPS recruited 450 trainee POs into the National Probation Service. This is based on the combined number of trainee POs and external Probation Services Officers HMPPS recruited prior to unification and does not account for any internal movement of HMPPS staff onto the training scheme or trainees who joined and worked in Community Rehabilitation Companies. The actual number of trainee POs recruited may therefore differ. Accounting for attrition, we have estimated that 380 trainees successfully qualified to the PO grade in the year ending 31 March 2022, two financial years after initial recruitment.
- 5 We used HMPPS's June 2025 Prison and Probation Officer recruitment data to estimate the trainee PO attrition rate. We have used an average trainee PO attrition rate of 17%, based on actual data from the financial years 2016-17 to 2022-23.
- 6 We used HMPPS's March 2025 workforce statistics data to estimate PO attrition rate for each financial year.
- 7 Our analysis does not account for the internal movement of POs, for example those who have moved to other roles within HMPPS or have been promoted to the Senior Probation Officer grade. Nor does it account for POs who have joined the Probation Service via other routes other than the training scheme, for example qualified POs returning to the Probation Service.

Source: National Audit Office Analysis of HM Prison & Probation Service data

2.6 The combination of increasing target staffing levels, insufficient recruitment and time taken to qualify means that, in March 2025, HMPPS assessed the estimated shortfall of POs to have increased since unification, with staff sickness and staff turnover also rising.

- HMPPS assessed that it had 5,636 FTE POs in post, leaving a shortfall of 1,479 FTE POs in the Probation Service in March 2025, a vacancy rate of 21% compared with 14% in September 2021. Rates vary geographically, reflecting greater difficulties recruiting and retaining staff in some regions. In March 2025, London, and Kent, Surrey and Sussex had the highest vacancy rates of 35% and 31%, respectively.
- In the year ending March 2025, the leaving rate for Probation Service staff was 9.3%, up from 6.2% at March 2021. The average annual staff sickness rate was 13.2 working days, up from 8.9 at March 2021. Mental ill health accounted for the largest proportion (40%) of sickness absence across HMPPS.

2.7 Staffing pressures are reflected in high practitioner workloads, particularly for POs. HMPPS's Workload Measurement Tool (WMT) uses staff working hours and caseload data to calculate practitioner workloads as a percentage (where 100% means that a practitioner's capacity is fully used). At a national level, the WMT showed POs were working at 118% capacity on average between January 2022 and April 2024. Figures varied across regions, from 104% in Wales to 126% in four other regions including London and East of England. Paragraphs 2.18 to 2.19 explain that issues with HMPPS's assumptions at this time mean that, in practice, these percentages would have significantly underestimated actual practitioner workload.

Focus on improving performance and productivity

2.8 Upon unification, HMPPS planned to increase performance and productivity. In April 2022, it introduced regional quality improvement plans, informed by performance data for that region. It launched a Regional Case Audit Tool in October 2021, which provided an assurance framework for staff and enabled Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) to monitor sentence management quality.

2.9 On productivity, HMPPS recognised that several probation digital systems contained many workarounds and manual processes, and it aimed to improve digital systems to increase efficiency. For example, probation practitioners told us that systems such as OASys, a tool for assessing offender risk, add unnecessary work. However, in 2021-22, funding pressures reduced the scale of the planned unification programme funding by £26 million. Following a prioritisation exercise, this led HMPPS to scale back its planned digital improvements, such as its remote supervision tool. HMPPS began developing a digital tool to largely replace OASys called Assessing Risks, Needs and Strengths (ARNS). HMPPS anticipates that improvements to risk management and sentence planning using ARNS could reduce offender assessment time by around 20%, giving practitioners more time to focus on quality. However, it does not expect to fully implement the system until the end of 2026.

2.10 HMPPS acknowledges that probation processes and systems remain inefficient, and there has been a culture of responding to risks by adding processes to existing processes. We did see good examples of innovation to free up staff time at a regional level. For example, in London, where workload pressure is particularly acute, the PDU we visited had trialled reallocating some administrative processes, such as managing electronic monitoring requirements, to a service centre in Norwich to free up staff. HMPPS is considering expanding the service centre model to other regions.

Impact of high volume of change on quality

2.11 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 the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) introduced to ease prison capacity pressures (**Figure 9** on pages 38 to 40). Although HMPPS has implemented several initiatives to improve quality since unification, staff we spoke to felt that a high number of system changes, coupled with staff shortages, has made it difficult to create the space to make meaningful improvements. For example, staff who are overstretched have less time for learning and development and fewer opportunities to learn from experienced colleagues. In 2023-24, HMPPS estimated there were around 100 new national proposals to change probation processes – 84% of which were business-as-usual changes, such as those required to meet ministerial commitments, and not linked to major change programmes. It estimated that it would take probation practitioners a week to read the associated guides and policy frameworks. HMPPS has also implemented policy changes for probation to offset the increase in probation demand arising from emergency measures to alleviate prison capacity pressures (see paragraphs 2.16 and 2.17). Some probation staff told us that the speed and volume of these changes has made it difficult for them to implement changes effectively, reducing performance.

2.12 In January 2024, HMPPS rolled out its Gateway Management System (GMS) to monitor and manage the volume of change experienced by probation regions. It uses the system to improve its change management co-ordination and lessen the burden of change fatigue on front-line staff. For example, during its implementation of the prison early release scheme SDS40, HMPPS paused non-essential change. It plans to implement an annual two-month change pause when possible, to improve staff wellbeing and provide more time for learning and development.

Managing the risk of insufficient capacity

2.13 HMPPS has been reporting probation capacity issues on its risk register since unification and has implemented some temporary measures to help PDUs manage staffing shortages. For example, in January 2022, HMPPS introduced a prioritisation framework that permits PDUs to focus on agreed priorities at the expense of some rehabilitative interventions, based on their 'Red', 'Amber' or 'Green' status, determined by staffing and workloads levels (Figure 9). This means that 'Red' PDUs can prioritise cases assessed as at risk of serious harm and stop running accredited programmes, which aim to reduce the risk of reoffending.

2.14 In 2024-25, on average 46 out of 108 (43%) PDUs were at 'Amber' or 'Red' status and not delivering all mandated sentence management activities, 18 (17%) of which were 'Red' and delivering only basic supervision activities to satisfy public protection (**Figure 10** on page 41). HMPPS tracks the number of PDUs using its prioritisation framework at any one time and has found a slight reduction in the proportion of PDUs in 'Red' or 'Amber' throughout 2024-25. London has been most reliant on the framework, with an average of 12 out of 18 PDUs (67%) under 'Red' status in 2024-25.

2.15 Although workloads remained high, particularly for POs (working at around 118% capacity), urgent capacity issues in the prison estate drew focus away from probation, and HMPPS did not introduce major further changes to workload until 2024. HMPPS explained that there were some weaknesses in its risk management approach post unification. For example, it did not establish a clear threshold for capacity pressures, and its governance structure to escalate risks was not used fully.

Figure 9
Key developments in the Probation Service over the last 10 years, between 2015 and 2025

The Probation Service has been subject to many successive changes over the last 10 years

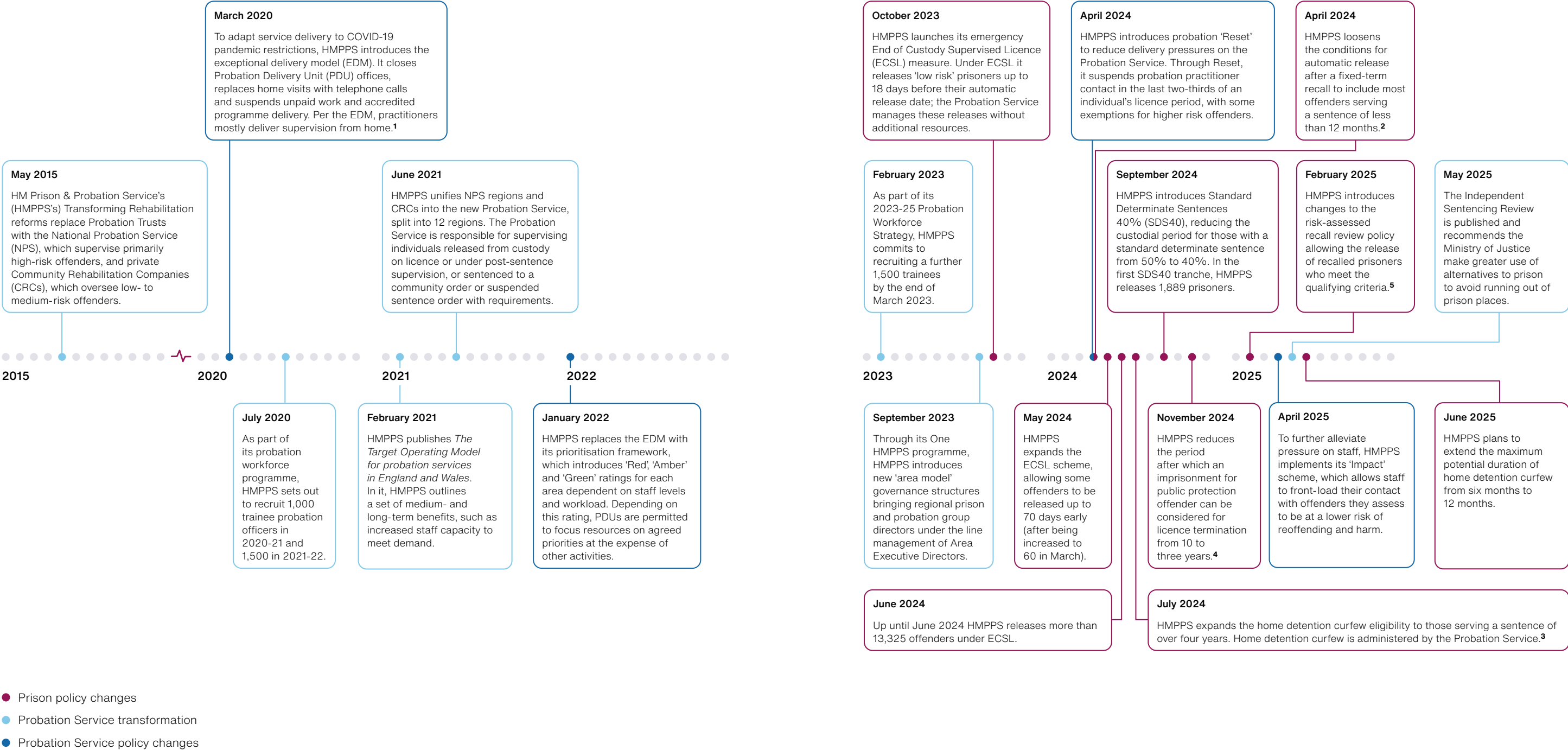


Figure 9 *continued*
Key developments in the Probation Service over the last 10 years, between 2015 and 2025

- Notes**
- 1 Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) are local Probation Service offices; there are 108 PDUs across England and Wales.
 - 2 A fixed-term recall happens when an individual who was released from prison on licence breaks the rules of their probation. In this case, they are sent back to prison for a set period, for example 14 days if their original sentence was less than 12 months.
 - 3 Home detention curfew enables eligible, risk-assessed offenders to be released from prison six months before their conditional release date to licence conditions and a curfew enforced by an electronic monitor, in order to have a transition period after leaving custody and beginning supervision in the community.
 - 4 Sentences of imprisonment for public protection were available for courts to impose from 2005 to 2012. They were designed to detain offenders who posed a significant risk of causing serious harm to the public through further serious offences in prison until they no longer posed such a risk.
 - 5 A risk-assessed recall review is a process where probation and prison staff evaluate whether a person who has been recalled to prison (for breaching licence conditions) still poses a risk to the public, and whether they can be safely re-released into the community.

Source: National Audit Office of HM Prison & Probation Service documents and published information

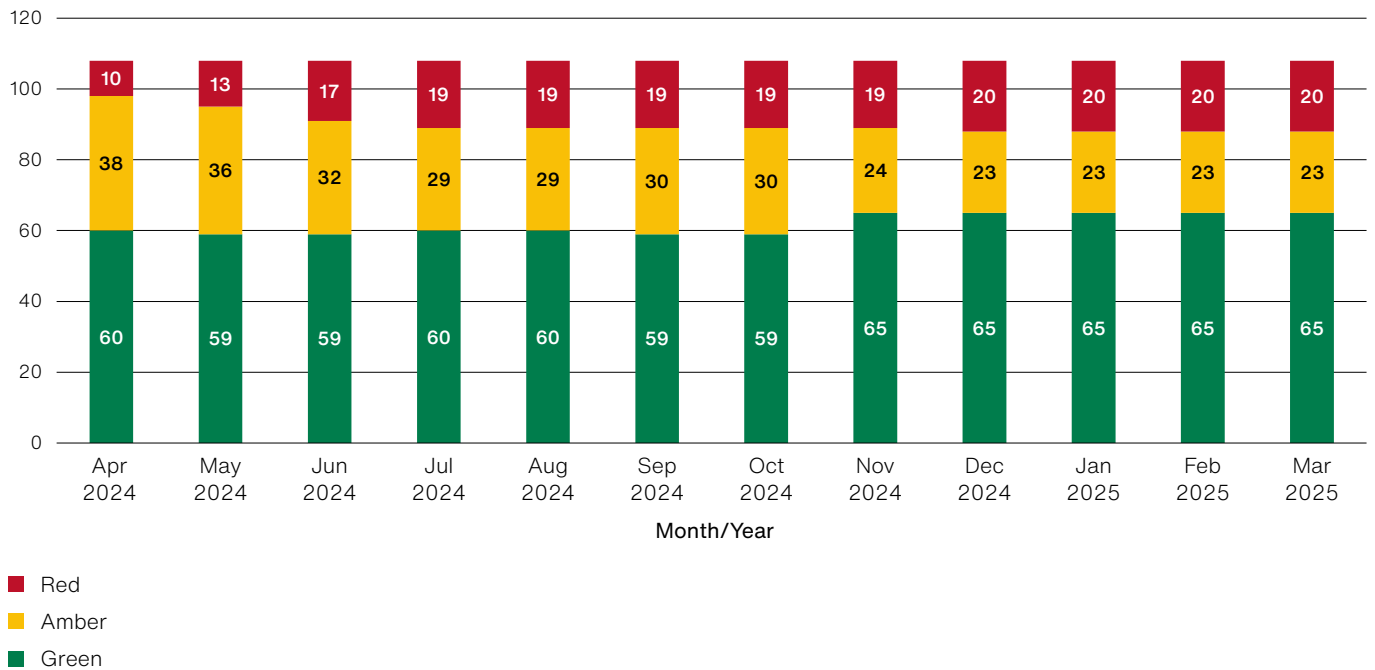
2.16 In March 2024, HMPPS began to make improvements to its risk management approach in response to prison capacity pressures. For example, as part of regular risk assessments, HMPPS began to establish clearer lines of escalation and governance for systemic risks, including capacity. In April 2024 HMPPS initiated Probation ‘Reset’, a measure to help offset emergency action taken to release offenders early, to free up prison capacity (Figure 9). However, this did not sufficiently reduce workloads for POs. Under Reset, practitioner contact is largely suspended in the last third of an individual’s licence period, with some exemptions for some categories of offenders, such as those assessed as very high risk of serious harm. HMPPS’s data show a decrease in workloads following Reset; it also allowed practitioners to increase contact with ‘very high risk of serious harm’ cases by around 15% to 20%. However, in most probation regions (10 out of 12), POs still had workloads of above 100% capacity on average. This will be an underestimation due to HMPPS’s inaccurate activity timing estimates (see paragraphs 2.18 to 2.19). POs we spoke to said they did not feel that Reset had reduced workloads much, as some work was still required on cases where contact is suspended, for example enforcement work.

Figure 10

Number of Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) in 'Green', 'Amber' and 'Red' status under HM Prison & Probation Service's prioritisation framework in England and Wales, April 2024 to March 2025

In 2024-25, on average 46 out of 108 (43%) PDUs were not delivering all mandated sentence management activities, 18 (17%) of which were under 'Red' status and delivering only basic supervision activities to satisfy public protection

Number of ratings



Notes

- 1 The Probation Service prioritisation framework gives guidance on measures which PDUs can apply to manage demand in the event of capacity pressures.
- 2 'Green' status refers to business-as-usual operational service delivery where a PDU must deliver all mandated activities.
- 3 'Amber' status refers to operational service delivery where PDUs, under the discretion of the Regional Probation Director or Chief Probation Officer, can pause some mandated activities. For example, practitioners can stop face-to-face offender supervision and opt for telephone contact instead.
- 4 Red' status refers to operational service delivery where, under the discretion of the Regional Probation Director or Chief Probation Officer, PDUs can pause a further set of activities in addition to those listed under the 'Amber' status. For example, practitioners can stop operating accredited programmes entirely in order to prioritise risk of serious harm cases.

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

2.17 In late 2024, HMPPS began developing its 'Impact' scheme to further alleviate pressures on staff, so that practitioners can spend more of their time with higher-risk offenders. Under Impact, staff front-load their contact with offenders they assess to be at a lower risk of reoffending and harm. Staff help offenders to access support from organisations in the community, with supervision suspended after 16 weeks. However, offenders continue to remain subject to their sentence requirements, such as a drug rehabilitation requirement, after supervision has been suspended. Impact came into effect in April 2025. In February 2025, HMPPS also introduced a prioritisation framework for accredited programmes (AcPs), which prioritised places for individuals who pose the highest risk of harm and reoffending.

Inaccurate understanding of staffing required

2.18 In 2022, HMPPS recognised the need to review its assumptions around the time taken to complete different probation activities to better understand the number of staff it required; it then began to review these timings. Most reviews included surveying front-line staff to validate the average time taken for individual tasks. The team used sampling to generate the number of responses required to provide a representative dataset, for example one that would reflect workforce experience levels. HMPPS then adjusted some reported timings, based on its expectations. For example, in sentence management, staff reported it took on average 7.2 hours to complete an initial risk assessment and sentence plan, but HMPPS considered this should only take six hours. HMPPS explained that in some cases it judged further learning and development would help staff to complete tasks more quickly. HMPPS completed reviews of eight types of probation work between May 2023 and February 2025, and plans to complete all outstanding reviews of probation work by March 2026, so it will have updated timings for all probation activities.

2.19 In 2024, HMPPS found it had significantly underestimated sentence management activity timings, which accounts for almost half of probation activity, with 8,300 FTE staff (across all sentence management grades) as at April 2024. The updated activity timings mean that HMPPS has been significantly underestimating staff workloads and shortfalls. It found that, in 2024, based on staff-reported timings, it had underestimated the number of sentence management staff required by around 40% (around 6,900 FTE staff). Using its adjusted timings there was an underestimation of around 34% (around 5,400 FTE staff) (**Figure 11**). As the actual number of FTE staff in post at April 2024 was 2,000 lower than its estimated target, this suggests that the service had been operating with around only half of the staff needed to run sentence management as intended. HMPPS's estimates of staff required are indicative and were not subject to the full analysis it uses to calculate its target staffing figures. It has not yet updated its workload data for the revised activity timings, but has initiated a project to review the future requirements for its WMT. HMPPS also explained that it has put processes in place to maintain and update activity timings to ensure the accuracy of its modelling in future.

Figure 11

HM Prison & Probation Service's (HMPPS's) review of Probation Service activity timings, completed between 2023 and 2025

HMPPS's activity timing review of eight areas of probation found that it had significantly underestimated the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) sentence management staff required in 2024, by approximately 5,400 (34%)

Probation area of activity timings review (date completed)	Original target staffing	Estimated staff required based on staff-reported timings	Estimated staff required based on policy expectations	Estimated gap between policy expectation and original target staffing	Estimated gap between policy expectation and original target staffing
	(FTE)	(FTE)	(FTE)	(FTE)	(%)
Sentence management (July 2024)	10,298	17,170	15,658	5,360	34
Enforcement (November 2024)	247	358	342	95	28
National security division (November 2024)	95	109	122	27	22
Serious further offences (May 2023)	78	–	93	15	16
Court work (December 2023)	1,852	2,261	2,184	332	15
Unpaid work (February 2024)	1,699	1,688	1,718	19	1
Accredited programmes (February 2025)	1,125	1,338	1,004	–121	–12
Complaints (September 2023)	46	–	10	–36	–360

Notes

- 1 HMPPS's reviews of Serious further offence and Complaints work provided only a policy expectation view of workloads.
- 2 HMPPS completed the reviews between May 2023 and February 2025.
- 3 The work of the following roles was reviewed in each probation area. Sentence management: Case administrator (CA), Probation Service Officer (PSO), Probation Officer (PO), Senior Probation Officer (SPO); Enforcement: CA, B3 enforcement officers and B5 enforcement managers; National security division: CA, Multi-agency public protection arrangement administrators, Senior Administrative Officer (SAO), Polygraph Examiners, Specialist Probation Practitioners and Senior Operational Leads; Serious further offences (SFO): SFO Administrator (Band 2), SFO Reviewing Manager (Band 5) and SFO Manager (Band 6); Court work: CA, SAO, PSO, PO and SPO; Unpaid work: CA, Placement Coordinator, Supervisor, PSO and Operations Manager; Accredited programmes: CA, Programme Facilitators, Domestic Abuse Safety Officer, Treatment Managers and Programme Managers; Complaints: Band 2, Band 5 and Band 6 staff.
- 4 Target staffing figures were as at the time of each review, so may not reflect current targets.
- 5 HMPPS also completed a review of Intensive Supervision Courts (ISCs) in October 2024. This is not included in the table as ISCs are only operating in certain areas as a pilot, and therefore target staffing figures are not available.
- 6 HMPPS explained that its estimates of staff required are indicative and were not subject to the full analysis it uses to calculate its target staffing figures.
- 7 HMPPS plans to complete all outstanding reviews of probation work by March 2026 so it will have updated timings for all probation activities.
- 8 HMPPS surveyed front-line staff to validate the average time taken for individual tasks.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Prison & Probation Service's activity timing reviews

The case for further transformation

2.20 In December 2024, HMPPS made the case for further transformation of the Probation Service. It stated this was necessary to close the capacity gap, address poor performance, and enable it to manage expected increases in demand from the Independent Sentencing Review, launched in October 2024 to end the prison capacity crisis.¹⁵

2.21 In early 2025, HMPPS estimated that it would have a capacity gap of around 3,900 FTE (approximately 25%) in sentence management staff in 2026-27, even after its recruitment aims and some prioritisation measures such as Reset. This was largely due to its updated activity timings. In July 2025 it revised its estimate to 3,150 FTE staff out of a target of approximately 15,000 sentence management FTE staff, due to further modelling revisions and estimated reductions in staff required due to its Impact scheme.¹⁶ HMPPS is yet to complete work to convert updated activity timings data from other areas of probation into target staffing requirements for 2026-27.

¹⁵ Ministry of Justice, *Independent Sentencing Review 2024 to 2025*, 21 October 2024.

¹⁶ The shortfall and target include a small number of staff in management roles (around 250 in the target) that do not work directly in sentence management but whose staffing requirements are directly linked to the number of sentence management staff.

Part Three

HM Prison & Probation Service's current plans to secure the long-term sustainability of the service

3.1 This part of the report sets out HM Prison & Probation Service's (HMPPS's) current approach to improving the quality and resilience of the service through 'Our Future Probation Service' (OFPS) and the future risks that it needs to manage.

The 'Our Future Probation Service' programme

3.2 HMPPS established its OFPS programme in February 2025 to transform probation, including bringing together existing initiatives to maximise capacity. Through the programme, HMPPS aims to:

- free up operational capacity by 25% by April 2027; and
- design a sustainable service that can manage future fluctuations in demand and capacity.

HMPPS aims to improve performance of probation through the programme, and to increase retention and reduce staff sickness absence.

HMPPS explained that its 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 (see paragraph 2.21).

3.3 The programme comprises four operational workstreams: courts; custody, pre-release, electronic monitoring and resettlement; sentence management; and interventions and unpaid work. Across each workstream, HMPPS has been exploring innovative ways to carry out the following.

- **Implement policy changes, to reduce the volume of work:** This includes reviewing who receives supervision and at what intensity, including recommendations from the Independent Sentencing Review (ISR). This may include removing post-custody supervision for some groups, and operational changes such as reshaping supervision levels for different offender groups.
- **Optimise processes, to increase productivity:** This includes optimising processes, developing and updating digital tools, increasing the use of artificial intelligence (AI), reallocating some work across grades, and expanding the use of service centres (**Figure 12** overleaf).

It also includes a fifth Human Resources (HR) workstream, through which HMPPS is looking at the efficiency, consistency of application and staff experience of HR processes associated with work-related stress absence and wellbeing in probation.

Figure 12

HM Prison & Probation Service's (HMPPS's) 'Our Future Probation Service' (OFPS) programme operational workstreams

HMPPS began exploring options to address workload pressures and capacity issues through its 2025 OFPS programme¹

Workstream	Description
Policy changes including Independent Sentencing Review implementation options	
Courts	Extend the use of out-of-court disposals, such as fines, allowing the police to deal with low-level offending and therefore reducing the flow of offenders into the Probation Service. ²
Custody, pre-release, electronic monitoring and resettlement	Reduce or remove the licence period for certain cohorts of offenders. Deploy electronic monitoring to support community sentence orders.
Sentence management	Reduce probation supervision for those on community and suspended sentence orders, for example by legislating probation 'Reset'. Develop an incentive-based scheme to drive good offender behaviour and compliance, for example in UPW, to reduce the amount of time an individual is under supervision.
Interventions and unpaid work (UPW)	Reform UPW to allow requirements to be completed over the full length of the offenders' sentence instead of within the first 12 months.
Process optimisation options	
Courts	Reduce court target staffing by better matching probation role requirements to resourcing.
Custody, pre-release, electronic monitoring and resettlement	Review delivery of the Offender Management in Custody model to improve productivity and efficiency. ³
Sentence management	Deploy the new Assessing Risks, Needs and Strengths (ARNS) digital tool to improve the quality of risk assessment and sentence management planning. Develop new digital tools, such as the 'Managing People On Probation' tool and an artificial intelligence tool to transcribe and summarise probation supervision meetings, and expand use of service centres to optimise processes and enable more efficient working. Divert more medium risk cases from Probation Officers (POs) to Probation Services Officers to reduce the POs' workload.
Interventions and UPW	Expand the role of Commissioned Rehabilitative Services in addressing offender needs for certain cohorts to reduce probation practitioner time on addressing offender needs.

Notes

- ¹ This is not an exhaustive list of options that HMPPS is exploring as part of its OFPS programme.
- ² Out-of-court disposals are measures used to deal with low-level offences without going to court, offering less costly alternative to prosecution.
- ³ The Offender Management in Custody model is a framework designed to coordinate and sequence a prisoner's journey through custody and after release, focusing on rehabilitation, reducing reoffending, and supporting reintegration into the community.

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

Choosing the programme components

Process optimisation options

3.4 HMPPS originally aimed to surpass its 25% workload reduction target to achieve a total reduction of 40%, equally split between its process optimisation and policy changes workstreams. However, HMPPS's initial estimates from the design of digital and process improvements suggest that achievable workload reductions are likely to be lower than it originally hoped. It expects changes will only free up the equivalent of around 1,700 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff. Its design process has helped it to identify and deprioritise process improvements that, it has assessed, will not have sufficient impact on workloads.

Policy change options

3.5 Prior to the outcome of the ISR, HMPPS estimated that ISR recommendations, combined with other policy decisions on the scope of probation services (its policy changes workstream), could reduce workloads by up to 20%. However, it now estimates that the changes will result in a net overall increase in staffing required (**Figure 13** overleaf). The ISR recommendations include some capacity-releasing measures, such as removing post sentence supervision for offenders with custodial sentences of under two years. However, the recommendations will mean a larger increase in demand for probation supervision than HMPPS originally expected (9,500 to 12,000 vs 5,300). This is largely due to recommendations to:

- use short sentences only in exceptional circumstances and increase the use of suspended sentences; and to
- introduce an 'earned progression' model for prisoners serving standard determinate sentences.¹⁷ Under this model, most prisoners will be released after serving a third of their sentence (currently 40% to 66% for most offenders) unless they have time added for bad behaviour.¹⁸ Once released, offenders will be supervised in the community by the Probation Service until the two-thirds point of their sentence, unless exempt, with a presumption of electronic monitoring (tagging) post release. Around half of offenders will be unsupervised in the last-third of their sentence, which is expected to offset the impact on probation of the earlier release point. However, the presumption for tagging will mean more work for probation overall (initial estimates indicate electronic monitoring caseloads could increase by around 8,000 to 14,000).

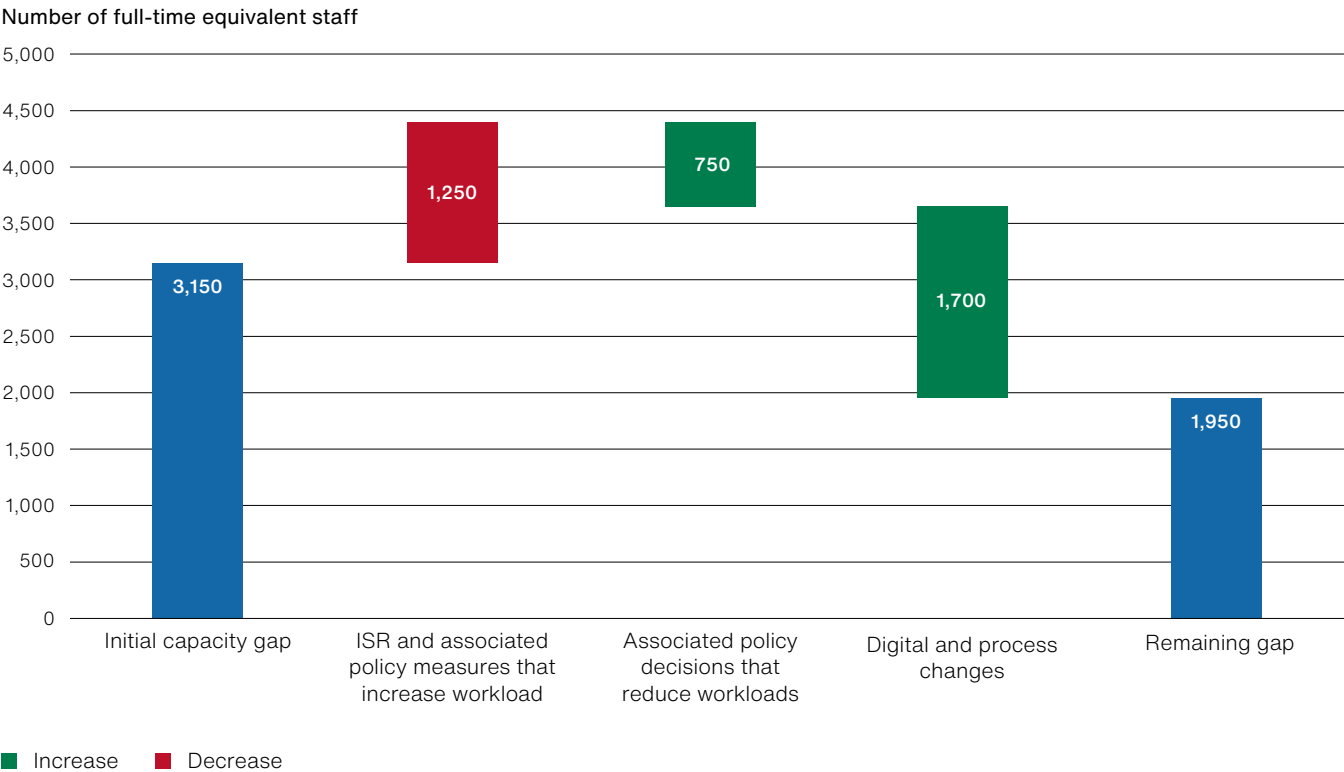
¹⁷ Standard determinate sentences are when the court sets a fixed length for the sentence. They are the most common type of prison sentence.

¹⁸ Release points vary under the current model. Certain prisoners are also eligible for release as early as 20% through Home Detention Curfew (HDC).

Figure 13

Estimated impact of the Independent Sentencing Review (ISR), agreed probation policy measures, and digital and process changes on the sentence management capacity gap (as at September 2025)

HM Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) expects that the ISR recommendations and associated policy changes will result in a net increase to the probation workload, and its estimated reductions from changes to digital and process changes are lower than it originally expected; HMPPS acknowledges that it will therefore need to make bolder decisions around changes to the scope of probation



Notes

- 1 Estimates are for the year 2027-28, when HMPPS expects impacts from the ISR and other policy changes to reach steady-state.
- 2 The initial capacity gap already factors in estimated workload reductions from Probation Reset, a measure to help offset emergency action taken to release offenders early, to free up prison capacity initiated in April 2024. Under Reset, practitioner contact is suspended in the last third of an individual's licence period, with some exemptions for higher risk offenders; and from HMPPS's Impact scheme, under which staff front-load their contact with offenders they assess to be at a lower risk of reoffending. Staff help offenders to access support from organisations in the community, with supervision suspended after 16 weeks. Impact came into effect in April 2025.
- 3 The remaining capacity gap is indicative and subject to final Spending Review allocation decisions.
- 4 ISR measures include a presumption to suspend short sentences; extending suspended sentence orders; the impact of the progression model; a presumption of electronic monitoring as part of the progression model; and fixing recall at 56 days for those serving a standard determinate sentence.
- 5 Agreed probation policy measures include giving practitioners the power to end orders early; extending the period over which unpaid work (UPW) can be completed; and providing offenders with incentives to reduce the amount of UPW they must complete.
- 6 HMPPS is currently only measuring progress against its latest estimate of the capacity gap in sentence management. It plans to incorporate gaps in other areas of probation, as it completes additional modelling up to March 2026.
- 7 Estimates have been rounded to the nearest 50.

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

3.6 The overall net impact of the ISR will not be offset by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and HMPPS's plans to implement policy measures agreed alongside the ISR, such as allowing probation practitioners to end some orders early on completion of the sentence plan. This, combined with lower-than-expected reductions from digital and process changes, means that it will need to address a remaining capacity gap of around 2,000 FTE staff in sentence management (Figure 13). HMPPS expects it will therefore need to make bolder decisions around changing the scope of what probation delivers. For example, it is currently considering reducing the number of contacts practitioners have with offenders per year, which it estimates might reduce the staffing gap by approximately 1,000 FTE. HMPPS also told us that it may need to further narrow access to rehabilitative interventions.

Probation service funding

3.7 The ISR acknowledged the strain that the Probation Service is already under and recommended increased investment to boost its resilience. In the 2025 Spending Review, the government committed to increasing probation funding by up to £700 million by 2028-29. HMPPS explained that this is to allow it to implement ISR recommendations, including tagging thousands more offenders, and to contribute to increased running costs due to monitoring more offenders. As at September 2025, MoJ and HMPPS are in the process of allocating their Spending Review settlement across areas of the organisation. However, HMPPS acknowledged that ministers will need to make difficult decisions, given that financial pressures still remain.

Challenges in implementing the programme

Fast-changing and interrelated policy context

3.8 The urgent need to reduce pressure on probation practitioners means that HMPPS is running the programme at pace and had to manage uncertainties due to the sequencing of internal and external events such as the ISR (**Figure 14** on pages 50 to 52). For example, HMPPS:

- put forward Spending Review bids in April 2025 – while it factored in early estimates of funding needed to respond to the ISR, it did not know the outcome of the ISR (published in May 2025) nor the impact of subsequent legislation on probation workload;¹⁹
- started designing options to free up capacity and planning the recommissioning of its Commissioned Rehabilitative Service (CRS) contracts before it knew the funding available through the Spending Review settlement; and
- has been renegotiating its staff pay deal with unions in parallel with consulting them on potential changes to the service.

MoJ implemented further measures to reduce prison capacity pressures in 2025, which means that HMPPS may need to develop and implement further interim workload reduction measures for probation alongside longer-term ones.

¹⁹ Ministry of Justice, *Independent Sentencing Review: Final Report and proposals for reform*, 22 May 2025.

Figure 14
HM Prison & Probation Service’s (HMPPS’s) ‘Our Future Probation Service’ (OFPS) programme design and delivery plan with ongoing risks and dependencies

The sequencing of OFPS design and delivery poses a significant challenge to HMPPS

OFPS programme workstream	Activity/event	Feb 2025	Mar 2025	Apr 2025		May 2025	Jun 2025	Jul 2025	Aug 2025	Sep 2025	Oct 2025	Nov 2025	Dec 2025	Jan 2026			
		Design and delivery															
Includes exploring options to optimise processes and develop digital tools to increase productivity	Process optimisation options					May to Jul 2025: Scope refinement											
								Jul to Aug 2025: Solution design									
								Jul 2025 to Jan 2026: Design and testing									
														Jan 2026: National rollout commences			
Includes looking at who receives supervision and at what intensity	Policy changes including Independent Sentencing Review implementation options							Jul 2025 to Jan 2026: Modelling, design and implementation planning									
Challenges of sequencing		Risks and dependencies															
Sentencing Review timelines meant that HMPPS began designing options to free up capacity before it knew how much increased demand the service would need to absorb	Independent Sentencing Review ³					22 May 2025: Independent Sentencing Review Published				Sep 2025: Sentencing Bill introduced to House of Commons							
HMPPS submitted its Spending Review (SR) bid, before it had fully scoped and designed options for its OFPS programme. It began refining the scope and design of options before it knew the SR outcome, which meant it did not have a view of funding available for the programme	SR ⁴			Apr 2025: HMPPS's SR bid submitted to HM Treasury (HMT)			11 Jun 2025: SR outcome										
HMPPS is renegotiating its staff pay deal with unions in parallel with consulting them on potential changes to the service	Trade union engagement			Apr 2025 to Jan 2026: HMPPS engagement and consultation with trade unions to secure OFPS buy-in on OFPS design and implementation													
	Pay award						May to Sep 2025: HMPPS develop and agree probation pay award business case										
											Sep 2025: Cabinet Office and HMT approval of probation pay award						
											Oct to Dec 2025: Formal trade union pay consultation						
HMPPS established a programme to recommission its men's Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) contracts prior to the outcome of its SR bid. Therefore, delivery of the full scope of its CRS contracts is subject to securing sufficient funding.	CRS recommissioning	Feb 2025: HMPPS procurement strategy approved by its Commercial Oversight and Approval Board					Jun 2025: Outline Business Case approval from Cabinet Office	Jul 2025: Outline Business Case approval from HMT	Aug 2025: HMPPS invites bids for men's services contract (wave 1)								

Figure 14 *continued*

HM Prison & Probation Service's (HMPPS's) 'Our Future Probation Service' (OFPS) programme design and delivery plan with ongoing risks and dependencies

Notes

- 1 For pay awards above that outlined in the 2025-26 Civil Service Pay Remit Guidance, a business case must be submitted to HM Treasury.
- 2 The Sentencing Bill will pass the majority of Sentencing Review recommendations into law.
- 3 The Independent Sentencing Review is an independent review of sentencing carried out by David Gauke.
- 4 A Spending Review is the process by which the government sets departmental budgets for future years.
- 5 The implementation of some changes to the scope of probation via the policy changes workstream will be dependent on Parliament approving the relevant legislation.

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

Tight timescales

3.9 HMPPS is taking an iterative approach to designing digital and process improvements to how the service is delivered. This includes a scope definition phase to choose which options to progress, a design phase to refine ideas and assess potential workload reductions, and a period of testing and implementation. During the scoping phase, HMPPS has worked with staff to understand where there are issues with processes, for example data re-entry and manual work, and where it can strip out low-value activity. It is developing digital changes, such as an AI tool to transcribe and summarise probation meetings and a central hub to provide access to timely data for practitioners, reducing duplication. 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 to the House of Commons in September 2025, which will operationalise ISR recommendations once passed into legislation. It now plans to do a staged rollout of its solutions with the aim of enabling the service to absorb the impact of increases in demand from the Sentencing Act.

3.10 The pace of the programme means that the time available to test solutions is limited. HMPPS acknowledges that it will need to balance iteration and user testing of solutions with the need to urgently roll out solutions in time to free up capacity. It also means that staff will have to deal with a high volume of change, including how to use new systems and change ways of working in a short timescale.

3.11 Most of the changes HMPPS plans to make to the scope of probation services require legislative change and are tied to the ISR recommendations and timelines. In May 2025, the Lord Chancellor endorsed most recommendations from the review. HMPPS is currently working with policy colleagues to develop operationally deliverable plans, reflecting ministerial policy decisions.

Limited evidence

3.12 In making decisions on scope changes, HMPPS aims to target resources where they can be most effective, but its evidence base is limited in some areas. For example, HMPPS has been exploring how it can better target home visits, but acknowledges that it lacks the evidence base required to do this.²⁰ Similarly, it does not yet know the impact of prioritisation schemes it plans to keep or expand, such as Reset and Impact. HMPPS plans to complete a process evaluation of Reset, but this will focus on delivery rather than the impact of Reset on offender rehabilitation or public safety outcomes. HMPPS's rationale for its Impact scheme is that existing research suggests that those with a lower likelihood of reoffending and serious recidivism benefit from less support, but more targeted, and from signposting to community services. However, those eligible for the scheme include offenders who HMPPS assesses have up to a 49% chance of reoffending and some who are assessed as posing a medium risk of serious harm.²¹ So it is not clear whether the scheme will have the intended effect for all those eligible.

Risk management

3.13 Our past work and insights demonstrate the importance of clearly articulating risk appetite and tolerance, both for effective innovation and when delivering programmes quickly.²² Our 2021 report *Delivering Programmes at speed* highlighted the need for decision-makers to assess how much risk they are willing to take on when delivering programmes at pace. A clear articulation of risk appetite and tolerance is also important to support decisions around possible trade-offs as the programme progresses.²³

3.14 In June 2025, just prior to the design phase of the programme, HMPPS set its risk appetite for the OFPS programme as 'open', the second highest category on the five-point risk appetite scale, indicating that it is willing to take on a high level of risk. It 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". The 'open' risk appetite applies to all risk categories, including risks of service disruption resulting from inadequate processes or technology, or that the programme may not achieve the expected benefits.

²⁰ Currently, home visits must be considered for all cases, and reasons recorded where one is not undertaken.

²¹ Compulsory and discretionary exclusions apply.

²² See for example: Gareth Davies, *Innovation key to unlocking gains in productivity and resilience*, 4 February 2025; and National Audit Office, *Overcoming challenges to managing risks in government: Good practice guide*, December 2023.

²³ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Lessons learned: Delivering Programmes at Speed*, Session 2021-22, HC 667, National Audit Office, 24 September 2021.

3.15 However, we found that HMPPS needs to do more to set out what this means in practice, for example it has not:

- made a detailed assessment of what accepting a high level of risk could mean in practice for its front-line services or aims of public protection and rehabilitation; without this, the programme, HMPPS and MoJ more widely risk inadvertently accepting a level of risk that they do not fully understand or cannot manage; or
- set clear thresholds for the level of risk the service can tolerate, for example the level of disruption that its workforce can cope with; without these thresholds, the programme may not recognise when it is exceeding acceptable limits, which could delay mitigation efforts and reduce the effectiveness of its response.

Risks to the long-term resilience of the service

3.16 Risks to HMPPS freeing up capacity to improve performance include the following.

- **The OFPS programme is currently only measuring progress against its latest estimate of the capacity gap in sentence management (around 25%), which may not reflect the full extent of the probation capacity gap.** The data HMPPS collected on how long it believes sentence management tasks should take (see paragraphs 2.18 and 2.19 in Part Two) have been vital in improving understanding of the capacity gap. However, HMPPS's calculations do not yet include additional staff needed for other areas of probation, where activity reviews are not yet complete. Nor do they account for the impact of the Independent Review of the Criminal Courts, which HMPPS expects will further add to the probation caseload. HMPPS also adjusted some timings based on its policy expectations (see paragraph 2.18), before using these to estimate its target staffing figures. Using staff-reported timings would significantly increase the sentence management capacity gap (for example, by approximately 1,500 staff in 2024). HMPPS hopes that a combination of process changes it plans to implement through the programme, and staff development, including supporting staff to embed learning into practice, will help to close this additional gap and plans to reflect these improvements in future iterations of its modelling. It also plans to incorporate gaps in other areas of probation, as it completes additional modelling up to March 2026.
- **HMPPS does not yet know if the programme will achieve the workload reductions required to provide an effective service.** Estimates around potential time savings for process and digital changes are uncertain at this stage. HMPPS plans to validate and track changes to capacity as the programme progresses, but it cannot yet understand whether the totality of its proposals will bridge the estimated capacity gap. HMPPS also lacks a good understanding of optimal caseload levels (numbers and risk profiles) to enable practitioners to deliver an effective service. A 2025 internal review of learning and development stressed that HMPPS will need to free up sufficient capacity beyond 25% to provide time for essential learning.

To provide greater confidence in its estimates of both the capacity gap and estimated reductions from digital and process changes, HMPPS has commissioned an external review of its assessments, which was due to be complete by the end of September 2025.

3.17 Changes to the supervision of offenders may pose a risk to the service's aims of public protection and rehabilitation, and to the government's 'Safer Streets' mission, which aims, among other things, to halve violence against women and girls and increase public confidence in the justice system. Examples of these risks include the following.

- HMPPS does not yet know the impact of prioritisation schemes on outcomes (see paragraph 3.12). Some practitioners we spoke to raised concerns about the potential risk of schemes such as Reset and Impact leading to adverse outcomes for public safety or effective rehabilitation of offenders. Further, increased reliance on lighter probation supervision and greater community support for some offenders will require sufficient funding for its CRS and other third-sector organisations to ensure they have the capacity to meet offenders' needs.
- Under the progression model, offenders will be released and managed outside of prison at an earlier stage in their sentence, increasing the size and risk profile of the probation caseload.
- Probation Service Officers (PSOs) will need adequate learning and development and support to effectively manage higher volumes of medium-risk cases. This is one of the options HMPPS is considering, but some regions raised concerns that PSOs may lack the experience and learning and development to take on increased volumes of medium-risk cases. HMPPS explained that it has been strengthening its learning offer and plans to launch a new PSO qualification in late 2025 to early 2026.
- HMPPS acknowledges that some changes may make it harder to rehabilitate offenders serving short sentences and restrict their access to wider services. The removal of post-sentence supervision and measures such as Reset will cease or limit probation contact for those serving sentences of less than two years. This may limit rehabilitative opportunities and access to resettlement and substance misuse support.
- More offenders will be subject to electronic monitoring, although there were early backlogs in the new service. There were contract performance issues with HMPPS's new electronic monitoring provider, Serco, with backlogs in fitting tags. HMPPS told us that it has now significantly reduced the backlogs and contract performance has improved, but it accepts that increases in tagging volumes risk setting performance back. The increased use of electronic monitoring will also depend on prison leavers having or finding suitable accommodation. However, in the year to March 2024, 14% of offenders were homeless on release.²⁴

²⁴ Calculation excludes cases out of scope or where the status was unknown.

Appendix One

Our audit approach

Our scope

1 We reached our independent conclusions on whether the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and HM Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) are well placed to improve the efficiency and resilience of the Probation Service by analysing evidence collected between December 2024 and June 2025. We formed our conclusions after considering our three audit questions:

- 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).

Our original scope included a more detailed assessment of HMPPS's management and delivery of its Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) contracts. However, in view of MoJ's and HMPPS's aims to secure the long-term resilience of the Probation Service through further transformation, and the timing of the CRS recommissioning programme, we have adjusted the focus of our report slightly. Instead, we have chosen to explore the recent developments around HMPPS's newly established 'Our Future Probation Service' (OFPS) programme and associated risks in more depth.

Our evidence base

Interviews

2 We held around 30 remote interviews with officials from MoJ and HMPPS and discussed the performance of the Probation Service, service delivery, operational changes, and workforce and workload management with people in appropriate job roles relevant to the topic. This included staff responsible for:

- analysing and forecasting benefits, savings and efficiencies of the Probation Reform Programme;
- managing CRS contracts;
- modelling and forecasting probation workforce and caseload;

- developing probation change systems and dashboards; and
 - auditing quality, performance, assurance and risk of the Probation Service.
- 3** We attended more than 10 OFPS board meetings to stay informed of ongoing developments.
- 4** We also held 10 remote interviews with key third-party stakeholders including:
- HM Inspectorate of Probation;
 - CRS providers; and
 - third-party specialist organisations, such as the Probation Institute and probation trade unions.
- 5** We selected stakeholders with good knowledge of HMPPS and the probation system in England and Wales and stakeholders who are involved in the system as externally commissioned service providers. We identified them via desk research and with the help of our regular liaison points and invited them by email to participate in an interview. Discussions covered policy changes in the probation system, capacity pressure, CRS contracts, and delivery of rehabilitative services.

Quantitative analysis

- 6** We performed analysis of HMPPS's internal data as well as official government statistics including:
- probation caseload over time;
 - probation performance metrics over time;
 - HMPPS's workforce modelling and process-based activity timings data; and
 - HMPPS staffing data over time, including staff in post and leaving rate.

We took these data at their face value and did not audit the accuracy or completeness of the data used. We also did not validate the methodology HMPPS used to update its sentence-management activity timings.

- 7** With support from our Analysis Hub, we performed analysis of HMPPS's caseload, capacity and staffing model. This included the following: reviewing model scripts and assumptions; reviewing technical documentation, sensitivity analysis, and other associated reporting for reasonableness; and conducting structured interviews.

Field visits to Probation Delivery Units

- 8** We visited two Probation Delivery Units.
- Hammersmith, Fulham, Westminster and Chelsea Probation Delivery Unit, London, on 19 March 2025.
 - Wigan Probation Delivery Unit, Greater Manchester, on 2 April 2025.

9 We selected the Probation Delivery Units in regions with distinct performance outcomes and caseload volumes to ensure we captured diverse perspectives and approaches to the operational delivery of services, based on an analysis of caseload trends over time, regional Probation Service performance against HMPPS service level metric targets, and regional Probation Service scorecard ratings. The visits are not intended to represent the views of all staff throughout the Probation Service.

10 Each of our visits included interviews with the following: Regional Probation Director; Head of Performance and Quality; Head of Probation Delivery Unit; and Head of Unpaid Work and Accredited Programmes. During our visits, we also held several focus groups with front-line staff, including Senior Probation Officers, Probation Officers, and Probation Service Officers; administrative staff; programme and contract management teams; and local partners such as local authority and health partners.

11 The purpose of the visits was to support our understanding of the work processes, reforms, opportunities and challenges facing the Probation Service and triangulate evidence from other sources relating to our study questions.

Document review

12 We reviewed more than 1,200 MoJ and HMPPS documents relating to probation policy and operational changes, strategy, modelling, and caseloads, workforce, and risk management. The documents reviewed included, but were not limited to:

- business cases for key change and reform programmes including HMPPS's Probation Reform Programme and CRS Recommissioning Programme;
- HMPPS's probation workforce programme and recruitment and retention strategies;
- HMPPS's internal performance, evaluation and assurance reports;
- ministerial submissions relating to the Sentencing Review, OFPS programme, and policy and operation changes;
- capacity reviews on practitioners' caseloads and accredited programmes;
- performance framework for future CRS; and
- documents associated with HMPPS's modelling of caseload, capacity and staffing as well as any supporting technical documentation.

13 We reviewed each document against our three audit questions. We also made use of specialist expertise within the National Audit Office to support our review and interpretation of key documents. For example, we liaised closely with our Financial and Risk Management Hub on our review of HMPPS's approach to risk management.

Appendix Two

Commissioned Rehabilitative Services insights

Figure 15

Insights on HM Prison & Probation Service's (HMPPS's) approach to Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) contracts

We identified positive aspects as well as areas for improvement in HMPPS's delivery of its existing CRS contracts against our *Managing the commercial lifecycle: Good practice guide*; we have fed back our findings on our insights¹

National Audit Office points on good practice	Probation practitioners (PPs), HMPPS contract management staff and/or CRS providers we spoke with highlighted the following
Requirement: Organisations should be clear about what outcomes they are seeking to achieve, to help set out their requirements when entering into commercial agreements.	- Support for HMPPS's revised aims for its recommissioned men's contracts to be more holistic and locally embedded. - Concerns about the effectiveness of CRS accommodation contracts, particularly over the need for continued engagement by probation staff in local authority referrals.
Sourcing approach: There should be good consideration of all sourcing alternatives and of how effective competition supports value for money.	Support for continued use of HMPPS's Regional Outcomes Innovation Fund as a mechanism to flexibly commission specialist services.²
Process, supplier evaluation and agreement: There should be consistent adherence to public procurement processes, such as clearly specified requirements that can be assessed properly by all potential suppliers, and timetables, in order to realise the benefits of the procurement process, including competition.	- Insufficient time allowed for commissioning and mobilising HMPPS's existing CRS contracts, which affected providers' ability to operationalise services. - Uncertainty and inaccuracy regarding the volume of expected offender referrals.
Contract management: Organisations should give active attention to the quality of performance and delivery throughout the commercial lifecycle, to supplement routine monitoring.	- Issues with HMPPS's approach to measuring and validating offender outcomes achieved through CRS delivery. - Concerns regarding PPs and CRS provider channels for communication, including limited functionality of the digital tool for information sharing. These communication issues detract from high-quality service delivery.

Notes

¹ National Audit Office, *Managing the commercial lifecycle: Good practice guide*, February 2025. Available at: www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/managing-the-commercial-lifecycle-2025.pdf

² Regional Outcomes Innovation Fund is a small pot of money available to regions, intended to help lever investment in wider services (for example, by entering co-funding arrangements with Police and Crime commissioners or other commissioners) that may help reduce reoffending but are not directly delivering the order of the court.

This report has been printed on Pro Digital Silk and contains material sourced from responsibly managed and sustainable forests certified in accordance with the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council).

The wood pulp is totally recyclable and acid-free. Our printers also have full ISO 14001 environmental accreditation, which ensures that they have effective procedures in place to manage waste and practices that may affect the environment.



National Audit Office

Design and Production by NAO Communications Team
DP Ref: 015397-001

£10.00

ISBN: 978-1-78604-637-6