

The Probation service is a mess. The reforms brought in under the guise of Transforming Rehabilitation have taken a formerly award winning service and destroyed it. So much has been reported about the failings in the system and we wanted to offer a practitioner's vision for a repaired and rebuilt probation service.

Reunification is key

Any split in the Probation Service will be equally if not more of a disaster than the one we are currently suffering. Separating a service into different providers creates gaps and blocks to communications and additional work is required to bridge these. Creating an additional workload that simply is not necessary and does little to support frontline work.

Probation professionals can either be specialists in one area of work or work across different disciplines and the ability to be flexible across a career can retain skills and experience of people which might otherwise be lost to the service. Those working in the probation system have a strong commitment to team working and sharing experience and knowledge and losing this due to an artificial split harms everyone. So any future service design must be based around a unified probation service. This unification should apply to the core services of giving reports and advice to Courts, managing cases, all risk assessments including MAPPA and other multi agency arrangements, delivery of core interventions and unpaid work.

Splitting off the delivery of unpaid work on the basis that it is not a core service is problematic. In London this was attempted prior to TR and it failed, demonstrating that management of the delivery of unpaid work must be integrated into the delivery of the sentence. This doesn't prevent engagement of specialist providers for some work placements as will be detailed later. The delivery of some interventions includes associated work such as victim liaison (partner support worker), multi agency work including MARAC and liaison with children's services and other agencies. Splitting this from the case management work will create problems in communications, information sharing and duplication of work. Delivery of interventions such as accredited programmes should be integrated with the delivery of the sentence and again this does not prevent the involvement of specialist providers.

It may come as some surprise to those who believed the hype around Transforming Rehabilitation that many of the former Probation Trusts had extensive and innovative contracting arrangements with local specialist providers.

These ranged from specific Unpaid Work placements to provision of specialist interventions to partnership arrangements for supporting those with specific needs. Former Probation Trusts also had partnership arrangements with other statutory and voluntary agencies to focus on local priorities and needs.

Examples from one former Trust were specialist Unpaid work placements for those who couldn't work in a group, a specialist allotment project for those with mental health issues, progressive unpaid work placements that allowed clients to gain vocational qualifications and develop skills to support them into work. Another former Trust, in partnership with a women's centre, provided funding for specialist workers who offered interventions and support to women. The probation staff working with women were based in the women's centre to support the "one stop shop" approach. Other agencies and organisations also provided specialist services at the women's centre and some were part-funded through a contract with the Probation Trust. Another former Trust had multiple contracts to provide specialist services around housing, substance use, mental health, skills and employment. One former Trust even set up a partnership with the local prison to offer "through the gate" support to those serving less than 12 months who weren't offered probation support at the time.

Some might ask why these partnerships and contracting arrangements can't work now and the answer to that is complex but the vision for the future must allow for these type of arrangements with specialist local providers. The National Probation Service currently in operation is centralised and bureaucratic and leaves little room for the type of innovative and localised arrangements we need to return to. A national contract for support services or interventions won't fit the differences between densely populated urban areas and sparsely populated rural areas. What is needed in Camden isn't necessarily the same as what is needed in Carlisle. Ideas around devolution and localism seem to be everywhere at the moment but not in the probation world. Currently the National Probation Service is not allowed to contract services directly but must go through the local CRC. CRCs struggling to make the contracts financially viable have little spare capacity to develop the type of small and specialist contracting arrangements that really work.

What can or should we do?

The first step is to reunify the whole of the Probation service into one organisation that is in public control. The next step after reunifying Probation is to re-localise it. It is perfectly possible for the service to remain as a publicly controlled organisation but with local accountability. In the past this was delivered via a board or trust model and allowed the Board, the Chief Officer and Operational Leads to develop specific partnership and contracting arrangements and respond to local needs and priorities.

This would free practitioners to develop innovative responses to local needs and to work with those local leaders who are formulating a positive response to a local or national issue. It would allow those working in areas where knife crime is rife to work with local projects on prevention as well as desistance. It would also allow those working in areas where a significant event happens to work with community groups, sentencers and all local agencies to respond. This has happened in the past when, following riots or large scale terror related operations partnership working helped to ensure that desistance and a positive future were the focus rather than retribution and demonising perpetrators, perpetuating the cycle of exclusion.

The structure of the new Probation Service could be a Board or Trust but it should in any case be publicly owned and funded outside of the Civil Service. The fact that the National Probation Service (NPS) sits within the civil service has been problematic from the start. From the inability of the shared service model for HR and payroll to cope with terms and conditions that vary from the standard to the remoteness of decision makers and the requirement for uniformity in delivering services regardless of local need it has stifled the ability of practitioners to deliver. The Probation Service could be a non-departmental public body, similar to Cafcass. A board or trust structure would allow for local stakeholders to be represented in the management of the service and for the decision makers to be more accessible to the frontline workers and vice versa. This structure also allows for a change in the delivery of support functions such as HR, payroll, finance and IT which should always be viewed as supporting the frontline workers in the delivery of the service and not hindering them.

As a Probation practitioner my vision is a Probation world where I can work with clients in the way that best suits their needs, not the way that best ticks the boxes of a bureaucracy with little knowledge or understanding of the community I serve. At a time when all of the research indicates that a positive working relationship with a worker who believes in them is vital for someone to desist my vision is to be given sufficient time and space to develop that relationship, regardless of arbitrary targets. When I start working with someone who finds it hard to engage, it must be made possible for me to spend the first few sessions building the relationship instead of filling in forms to meet impossible deadlines.

My vision is for a service which is built around a national model for best practice but rooted in the local community and responsive to local need. My vision is a service free from the burden of the profit motive and endless bureaucracy. My vision is for a service in which I can develop my skills, think critically about the work I am doing, work in ways that research suggests will be effective and be free to challenge the status quo.

My vision is for a service where the frontline workers are positively supported by a management structure which is designed to get the best from them not punish them, where functions like HR, payroll, finance and IT work to support the endeavours of front line staff and not the other way round. My vision is for a service where instructions and directives give a framework for best practice, not a prescriptive narrow set of rules to follow which result in additional paperwork, form filling or bureaucracy.

As a trainee Probation Officer, many years ago, I learned to put my client at the centre of the work that I did, and to ensure that I worked in an inclusive and collaborative way. My vision is for a service which uses this as a model for their work with me as a frontline practitioner, to put the client at the centre of their work and to strive for inclusivity and collaboration in all that they do. My vision is for a return to the focus on quality and excellence and to be seen as a professional in the work that I do, to be allowed to make decisions about my work and the way that I carry it out. My vision is for a future where I make a difference to the lives of clients and those in the community I serve not despite the system I work in but because of it.