

Working Links collapse

On Friday 15 February it was announced that Working Links, a private company providing probation services for medium and low risk offenders, had gone into administration.

Working Links had been running Devon Dorset and Cornwall CRC, Bristol, Gloucester, Somerset and Wiltshire CRC and the Wales CRC since 2014, and their struggles to meet contract expectations were well documented.

Napo had raised mounting concerns about service delivery and financial sustainability with the Justice Committee, HMPPS Officials and Ministers at every opportunity. Despite this, calls to bring the three CRCs back into public ownership were ignored by the MoJ.

In doing so, the MoJ has neglected its duty to provide adequate probation services, protect the public and ensure rehabilitation of clients. Worse still, beyond the transfer order that was signed last week, the Ministry have also neglected the staff that work in the CRCs by offering them nothing in the way of assurances in terms of job security going forward.

Seetec, who currently run Kent, Surrey Sussex CRC took control of the areas previously run by Working Links under a rescue package. This may offer short-term stability, but we know there are potential job cuts ahead as a result of this process, particularly among corporate staff.

With the current contracts due to end in 2020, Napo maintained that the Government should have taken control of the failing CRCs.

On Friday 15 February 2019 HMI Probation also published a report into, Devon, Dorset and Cornwall CRC. It was truly damning, and rated the CRC as 'inadequate'. This highlights the imperative for investment and real change to bring this area back up to the high standard of probation services that existed in the past.

The Government has questions to answer, unfortunately, the Secretary of State chose not to make a verbal statement to the Commons this week and avoided having to take questions.

The circumstances of Working Links entering into administration is of such gravitas that Napo believes it requires full Parliamentary scrutiny in the same way as occurred after the Carillion debacle.

Following a meeting between the Unions and Seetec this week we are seriously concerned that the company and its senior CRC managers have not carried out proper due diligence and have not even costed this rescue package. Whilst they may have aspirations to make real changes, we need to be realistic as to what can

happen in 12 months given the state that Working Links has left this probation provider in.

For example, they wish to increase front line staff by 20% but there is a real shortage of available experienced and qualified staff in the areas concerned and Napo doubts their ability to achieve this in a timescale that will make any discernible difference.

The future Probation programme

Napo understands that the MOJ has now had to put back its timetable for TR Mark 2, (already unrealistic as admitted even by existing CRCs) and this may be as a result of the demise of Working Links. The MOJ has this week published a statement that they wanted to develop their thinking on this topic and therefore needed to delay some marketisation events.

Whilst we welcome this and are currently seeking another meeting with Ministers to encourage them not to rush into repeating the same mistakes, this delay to the programme will create greater uncertainty for Napo members and probation service clients.

Our conclusion

Napo would ask that JUFCPG officers write to the Secretary of State on this issue, the detail behind the collapse of Working Links and the feasibility of the continued marketization of probation as a whole. We attach a letter from the Probation unions to Mr Gauke which poses some of the key questions.

Napo remains committed to a reunified probation service that is in public ownership and has a localised model that works involving all local stakeholders and agencies and is accountable to communities.

Ministers should at the very least look to replicate the agreed Welsh model that will see Offender Management work transition back into the Wales NPS for the rest of England by 2020, thus allowing a period of reflection about remodelling the delivery of probation in the long term.