**Serious Further Offences (SFOs) and Accredited Programmes – JUPG briefing**

The Probation Service has received heavy criticism over the past few weeks following the publication of two Serious Further Offence Reviews by His Majesty’s Inspectorate for Probation (HMIP). A common theme in both reports is that of high workloads, staff shortages and cases being held by inexperienced staff. Napo has been warning for some time that caseloads in probation are dangerously high and that that public protection has been diminished as a result.

Despite the ongoing recruitment drive by HMPPS, the situation has not improved. There are 500 vacancies in London alone and many of our members report that some offices are largely staffed by trainees or newly qualified officers who do not have the experience required to manage the most complex cases.

Napo met with the Minister last week to raise our concerns and to call for urgent action – in particular, to pause any more changes and to allow the Probation Service time to breath and to go back to basics with regards to its work. The push from Ministers for speedy justice is having a detrimental impact on the quality of Court reports. Practitioners need time to complete reports properly and to gather all the necessary information around safeguarding and risk in order to inform not just the Court but the sentence management going forward.

Ministers will argue that the “One HMPPS” model will improve joint working between prisons and probation. Napo, alongside our sister trade unions and stakeholders, argue that this new model will result in probation being subsumed by prisons and we will lose the profession altogether. The issue does not lie in poor multi-agency working but in systemic failings with probation as a direct result of the Transforming Rehabilitation failed privatisation and the continual agenda to reform and change how the service works.

Accredited Programmes

When the service was reunified in 2021, HMPPS drew up a Target Operating Model (TOM) outlining how the service would run. Two years on and there are still a number of areas yet to be implemented. One area in particular is Accredited Programmes.

During privatisation, General Offending Behaviours Programmes such the Drink Impaired Driving Programme and Thinking Skills Programme, as well as the domestic violence programme Building Better Relationships, were moved into the private Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs), while the Divisional Sex Offender Units (DSOU) remained in the public sector. Post-reunification, these have now all been brought under public control. One aim of the TOM is to bring these teams together.

The DSOU is a team of specialist probation officers. You currently need a minimum of two years’ experience as a qualified probation officer to work in this field. They work with the most complex and challenging cases of people who commit sexual offences, and provide advice and support to case management teams (critical at a time when the service has so many new and inexperienced staff), Courts and outside agencies, as well as Horizon, which is the community programme for men who commit sexual offences.

Under HMPPS proposals, this team will be disbanded and anyone working in the programmes team will be expected to all run all programmes, irrespective of their past work experience or qualifications. Alongside this, HMPPS are also proposing that their roles are job evaluated, with all staff remaining or being downgraded to a Band 3 (this is the band for staff who do not hold the probation qualification).

Napo has significant concerns about this proposal. Both of the recent SFO reports cited inexperienced staff as a critical issue in relation to the risk assessment and management of cases. These proposals will see staff who do not have the theoretical underpinning of sexual offences being directly responsible for part of their risk management in the community. Napo believes that this is not the time to reduce the level of knowledge held in this specialist team and risk losing a wealth of experience. Those in the team who are currently Band 4 will likely move back into case management or, as many have told Napo, leave the service completely.

In addition to this reform, HMPPS are also proposing a model called Next Generation of Accredited Programmes. This proposal is to stop delivering the four different programmes run by probation and replace them with a single programme that will aim to address all offending types. This one-size-fits-all approach is based on two factors.

The first is that in prisons there are currently 17 different programmes being run across England and Wales (probation only run four in the community) and this inefficient. However, making reforms based on prison models is yet further erosion of probation as a profession, fails to take into account that probation only run four programmes and fails to recognise the differences of running mixed cohort groups in prison compared to the community. For example, we know that clients on groups will Google other group members to find out what their offence is. When this has happened on an Unpaid Work Group, men who had committed sexual offences have had to be sent home for their own safety. There is also a direct risk to staff who will have to manage these groups, often on evening groups with very little support from the wider organisation.

The further concern is that this does not appear to be based on much evidence. Canada ran a pilot of a similar model a few years ago. However, they ran a high-intensity group alongside this for the most vulnerable and high-risk clients. The results of that pilot also proved that the programme was not very effective. There is no current research or evidence to support HMPPS’s proposal. Napo therefore does not have any confidence in this being more effective than the current provision and, at worst, it could prove to be dangerous and increase the risk of re-offending as well as the risks outlined above.

In light of recent SFOs and the high number of new and inexperienced staff in probation, Napo believe that these proposals will undermine public protection, increase the risk of Serious Further Offences, place staff and clients at risk and further de-professionalise the Probation Service. We are asking HMPPS to halt the disbanding of the DSOU and to provide evidence to support the Next Generation model. Like Transforming Rehabilitation, we believe it is yet another example of policy-driven reform without any evidence to support it.

Requested action

Supportive MPs are encouraged to table the following question for Justice Questions (deadline Thursday 9 February, question time Tuesday 21 February):

**What risk assessment his Department has made of the Next Generation of Accredited Programmes.**

Full notes and suggested supplementaries will be provided in the event that this question makes it through the shuffle. Questions you may wish to ask Ministers include:

* What research and evidence is the Next Generation of Accredited Programmes based on, and can the Minister share that with the House?
* What risks assessments have been carried out to assess the impact of disbanding the Divisional Sex Offender Units on public protection, risk management, clients and staff?
* Napo are concerned that these changes are based on reducing the costs of delivery and that this will have an impact on public protection at a time when the Probation Service has been heavily criticised for failings. How can the Minister justify these changes and reassure the public that it will not undermine public protection?
* The Probation Service is going through a huge recruitment drive, and as such many staff are new and inexperienced and rely on the support of specialist staff in the Divisional Sex Offender Units to support the critical work they do. Why are Ministers pushing for proposals that undermine public protection, according to staff union Napo, especially in complex domestic violence and sexual cases?

February 2023 – Tania Bassett, Napo National Official: tbassett@napo.org.uk, 07904184195