

Reasons for a Reunited Probation Service

Briefing 3: Public safety is compromised with a 21% increase in Serious Further Offences and community safety completely undermined by a divided organisation

A serious further offence (SFO) is one defined by a clear criteria outlined by the Ministry of Justice and includes murder, rape and kidnaping committed whilst subject to a community order or licence, or within 6 months of probation supervision finishing. Changes to this criterion by the then Secretary of State, Chris Grayling means that offences such as GBH are no longer included. It is therefore deeply worrying that, despite the list of offences that meet the criteria being reduced, we have seen a 21% increase SFOs being committed in both the CRCs and the NPS.

SFO reviews indicate that the main causes for this increase are:

Workloads: It has been highlighted in HMIP reports that staff in the NPS and CRCs are under immense pressure with unrealistic and dangerous workloads. Many staff in the NPS are on over 150% of the workload measurement tool with 100% being now used as the minimum benchmark. Some CRCs are seeing workloads of 80-100 cases with many of their original operating models approved by the MoJ being based on high caseloads and limited face to face contact.

The main reason for high workloads is staffing levels. The NPS has been short staffed since its creation, as errors were made when establishing the workloads the NPS would have (originally estimated at 50% but in reality 75%). HMIP estimate shortages being as high as 20% in parts of the country.

In the CRCs staff was cut down to the bone as per their operating models but they have now found that they cannot sustain such small numbers of staff, and have put the public at further risk by replacing direct contact with remote or telephone supervision.

Lack of information sharing: This is linked in part to workloads, as staff do not have the time to make checks with other agencies or things get forgotten in the high pressure of deadlines and targets. However, the split, which Napo believe is the fundamental flaw with TR, exacerbates this, with outside agencies unsure who to talk to and probation staff not being given adequate time to gather information. This has led to people falling through the cracks.

The MoJ has imposed an arbitrary target on the types and length of pre-sentence reports. This has led to many people being sentenced without a report at all, (2012/13 – 13% and 2017/18 – 50%). This means that vital information linked to risk is not being obtained at the first point of contact, meaning risk issues go unrecorded or identified.

Quality: HMIP has been consistently critical of CRCs lack of focus on public protection. Instead they have concentrated on targets and contract compliance and they fail to allow staff the time they need for public protection concerns, appropriate risk assessments and reviews. T

here is growing evidence of staff being allocated cases that they are neither trained nor paid to work with leading to mistakes and risk issues not being identified. Some CRCs have employed managers with no probation background at all, who are yet expected to have managerial oversight of risk management within their teams.

The NPS has been criticised for a lack of management oversight. SFO reviews have highlighted that managers are too busy to focus on professional supervision with staff or have oversight of their cases and management. Newly qualified staff are now expected to work with high and very high risk of harm clients with little experience and very little support. Many report feeling totally unqualified to carry out the work and attrition rates are high as a result. In areas where there are significant staff shortages, staff are being directed to use their judgement with regards to contact with many high risk cases having their contact reduced from weekly to fortnightly or monthly.

Questions you may wish to ask:

- What measures is the MoJ putting in place to reduce workloads to a safe and manageable level across both the CRCs and the NPS and how are CRCs held accountable for failing to provide public safety?
- What financial penalties have CRCs faced with regards to their performance in HMIP, the lack of focus on public protection and any SFOs that occur?
- There appears to be no transparency for CRCs when a SFO is committed as they investigate their own SFOs. How can the public get access to the reviews and hold their local provider to account?
- To ask the Minister for a breakdown of where SFOs have occurred and whether they are NPS or CRC?
- Will the Minister review the pre-sentence report targets and enable practitioners to make a professional judgement on which type of report they write?

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