

Professional Values and Workload Pressure: the results of Napo's survey of Probation and Family Court members on the impact of high workloads on staff and service delivery

A briefing from Napo, the Trade Union and Professional Association for Family Court and Probation Staff for the JUFCPG – 31 May 2017

As a professional association as well as a trade union Napo is concerned with working to uphold the professionalism of members' work and maintain professional standards and quality training. In both Probation and the Family Courts, members report an extremely concerning increase in workloads and demands in all areas of work which is impacting detrimentally both on the quality of the professional service and on staff's health and well-being.

In Probation this pressure has grown markedly in the aftermath of Transforming Rehabilitation and the split of the service into the NPS and the CRCs. In Cafcass Napo has been expressing concern since 2012 that demands in both the Public and Private Law Sectors have continued to rise, with no matching increase in practitioner resources.

Napo's Survey

At the end of March as part of Napo's Workloads Campaign (see later in this briefing) the union undertook a survey of its membership to document instances of excessive, unsafe, workloads and to collect staff's concerns about this. The survey was conducted across the whole of Napo's membership. This covers the National Probation Service, the 21 Community Rehabilitation Services, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, Agency workers and Cafcass (Family Court Services). The response to the survey, which was conducted between 20 March and 14 April, was overwhelming with Napo members providing information across all seven NPS regions and all of the CRCs. In the Family Courts the response was even higher.

Findings

The clear message received from the responses is that members are struggling with pressures in the workplace and this has impaired the quality of the services staff can deliver and in some cases impacted significantly on their health and wellbeing. This is particularly of concern given the nature of the work undertaken by staff in both Probation and the Family Courts.

- Napo members in the Family Courts work with vulnerable children and families in both private and public law cases; safeguarding children's welfare in divorce and separation proceedings, in care proceedings and in the adoption process.

- In Probation Napo members advise and assist the courts in relation to sentencing decisions, supervise clients on community orders, deliver programme interventions, enforce conditions of court orders, supervise unpaid, work in probation hostels and approved premises, provide rehabilitation work in prisons and advice to the Parole Board and undertake essential multi-agency public protection services, managing risk on a daily basis.

What members say

(NB: References below to probation services and probation staff include staff in the Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) who continue to deliver probation and rehabilitation services albeit in various job role titles).

Excessive workloads

Members have told us that the sheer amount of work that staff are expected to manage is overwhelming. For members who have workload management tool (WMT) facilities, ranges from 100% to 210% have been detailed. Unfortunately, there are also many administrative, managerial, programme facilitators and unpaid work staff members who do not have WMT facilities but experience overwhelming levels of workload pressure. Thus, evidencing and recording these overwhelming workloads can prove difficult. It should also be noted that many probation providers do not have a workload management tool for any of their staff and simply rely on caseload numbers.

Members have reported that the quality of their work in this situation is a concern. An NPS member detailed that they “... *feel unable to complete any work to an excellent standard and it appears good enough will suffice in these circumstances.*”

Similarly, a CRC member described the situation as a; “*Finger in the dam with more holes opening up everywhere [as].. a good analogy.*”

An NPS member from a different area reinforced the point; “*I am currently at 151% and have been for some time,*”

A CRC member detailed that attempts to deal with these issues can often be unsuccessful due to lack of resources and widespread pressures; “*I have reduced my hours by half but still have the same caseload (...). The only line manager available at this moment in time is part time and it is clear they are finding it stressful without the appropriate support. This makes it difficult to approach them as it is apparent that their stress levels are high.*”

A Manager member also reinforced this issue; “*My own workload as a manager is massive as now have responsibilities for training, HR issues, partnership meetings post TR. Furthermore I have to allocate work to staff who are at capacity based on WMT due to delays in national recruitment and vetting.*”

A Cafcass member reported that they are; “*Regularly working beyond contracted hours..*” with one member detailing “*I work far too many hours 50 plus hours a week to stay on top of things.*”

An NPS member says that explicitly they are; *“Asked to do more, faster but to a lower quality. Just told this is the way it is now.”*

Another Cafcass member highlighted the impact of the situation on committed and professional staff when stating that workload pressure; *“..affects my confidence because I don't feel as if I am achieving as well as I should be or that my performance reflects my ability or the standard of practice I deliver every day I am at work.”*

Similarly, a member currently working in an NPS environment stated; *“The word I commonly use in relation to my work is “relentless.” There is no time to reflect and consider my practice. I feel totally frustrated that I cannot spend the time needed with the service users with the result that I am unable to properly provide the support necessary to enable rehabilitation to have the best chance of a positive outcome.”*

Evidently some of this pressure has arisen from the push to achieve targets. An NPS member explained that; *“we are all under a great deal of pressure to deliver “on the day” reports where we do not have enough time to fully investigate and challenge behaviour and attitudes before we are continually being pestered by courts for a proposal. It is frowned upon by managers if we seek an adjournment which may have an impact on targets!”*

Concerningly, a CRC member reported that; *“I personally have worked over a weekend to ensure reports have met deadlines and this has not been acknowledged. I have been asked again by a manager to take my laptop home in order to meet an OASys deadline,..”*

Many similar comments describe members working 10-12 hour days, skipping lunch breaks and coming in at weekends just to try and cope with the increasing demands of their work.

Moreover, tasks are generally undertaken just to meet basic requirements. An NPS member said simply; *“at the moment [I] just find myself crisis managing them and not addressing offending behaviour.”*

A typical team situation is described by a CRC member; *“There is no support and requests for training largely go ignored. I work in an office where 4 out of 10 CMs are on long term sick, as is the manager. Since I have been there 3 colleagues have broken down in tears, one is drinking heavily and 2 have caseloads of over 90.”*

This common experience is obviously untenable. Unfortunately, our employers are unwilling or unable to address these issues so the pressure remains at a local and individual level as staff struggle to deal with the situation.

A PBNI member says that this; *“... situation cannot continue it's like working in a pressure cooker.”*

Staff health and well-being

This 'pressure cooker' situation is having a significant impact on staff health and wellbeing. A high proportion of the feedback Napo received regarding workloads referred to feelings of professional inadequacy, high levels of sickness, impacts on families and personal physical and mental health. It is not possible in this briefing to detail every comment made but the following are typical of the concerning situations faced by many members;

"I am so unhappy coming into work that I have panic attacks." (CRC member)

"I feel demoralised and have experienced high levels of stress which have impacted on my health." (NPS member)

"High workloads coupled with increasing case recording demands in the context of an increasingly isolated and unsupported working context have caused increased anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, affected and disrupted sleep patterns and negatively impacted on my confidence in doing my job well." (Cafcass member)

"I am struggling to cope and feel emotionally and physically exhausted.... I have ongoing medical issues that the workload stress is aggravating." (CRC member)

"My workload impacts upon my health (sickness absence highest ever been and worries me) wellbeing (struggling to fit in personal life/commitments), stress levels....." (NPS member)

"I was off work last year for 3 months with work related stress and it appears that my employers have completely forgotten this fact, their way of "helping me" is to continue to ignore my high workload and watch me drown until I wave the white flag and resign!" (CRC member)

"sleeplessness, gastric problems, relationship difficulties, snappy with colleagues, feelings of guilt and frustration" (NPS member)

"I feel stressed, tearful and overwhelmed." (Cafcass member)

"I contracted the Norovirus and I am convinced this was due to workplace stress and a lowered immune system. I have now opted for voluntary early retirement and am working my notice." (CRC member)

"Waking up in the middle of the night worrying about what I haven't done the day before and what I need to do when I get to work, forgetful, anxious, difficulty breathing and scared." (NPS member)

"I am at the end of my tether and completely burnt out." (CRC member)

"I am desperately trying to remain at work but my mental health is deteriorating after such a long time under significant stress and it has led to problems in my relationships at home." (NPS member)

Worryingly, a number of members cited work related issues as directly linked to serious health issues including heart attacks and strokes experienced by themselves or colleagues.

Risks to staff and public

The impact of workload pressures on staff health and wellbeing is evident in members' accounts. However, the impact on the risks to staff and the public of probation and family court services being in crisis is also noted.

A CRC member reported that; *"It feels out of control and dangerous."*

Another CRC member pointed out that they are; *".. worried that someone will be seriously hurt due to remote working practices,.."*

Staff with responsibility for managing people who have committed serious offences have detailed their concerns regarding ineffective supervision and basic management; *"I am missing prescribed targets, which this week included an ISP (initial sentence plan) for a high risk case who walked from court following a Wounding offence... (NPS member). With no risk management or supervision plans in place how effective are rehabilitation aims in reality?"*

This exacerbates concerns felt by staff. *"I am constantly anxious and terrified that I'll miss something critical because I haven't seen someone or completed some task."* (CRC member).

An NPS member detailed that staff have; *"..no time to do any offence focused work and are constantly fire-fighting."*

As stated by a CRC member; *"People are being left unsupported and work with social services, drug providers and mental health is shockingly scary."*

The feedback highlights that professional, experienced staff in the probation and family court services have repeatedly stressed their fears that reoffending rates will rise with increased numbers of victims being created. *"I am increasingly frightened that sooner or later there will be a tragedy as the time is not there for the careful assessment, information sharing and recording that is needed."*, warns a CRC member.

Specifically in the CRCs members reported receiving instructions to achieve unrealistic targets at the expense of essential tasks. *"Due to high workloads, I haven't undertaken home visits for months, I haven't made prison visits, I don't do regular OASys reviews, I don't attend Child Protection Core Groups (if I did that for every CP case I have, I wouldn't get anything else done) - my priority is hitting the cash linked targets in the time available."* (CRC member)

Other issues including Community Payback attendees being sent away due to not being on group lists, failures in enforcement due to workload pressures meaning statutory letters are not sent or recorded and supervisors "... *too often being put in very compromising situations, having to diffuse potentially difficult situations..*" (CRC Member), all add up to ineffective and unsafe practices.

What Napo says

Napo's Workloads Campaign has been launched to address these concerns and campaign for recognition of the issues facing members and solutions to address these issues.

Napo's 3 C's Campaign aims to;

1. Confront the issue of high workloads
2. Challenge the employers to address them
3. Champion professional standards

Napo has 5 campaign demands:

1. Implementation of an effective workload management tool based on realistic timings by all of our employers.
2. Training and guidance for managers on managing workloads and how to support frontline staff.
3. Workloads to be a standing item on all consultation and negotiating bodies and the establishment of local Workloads Committees.
4. All employers to acknowledge a duty of care for staff wellbeing and to carry out workload/stress audits regularly and also take remedial action.
5. Probation Operating Models to be audited to ensure they are fully resourced and properly staffed to allow client focussed work and maintain professional standards.

It has long being reported that the prisons are in crisis but since the implementation of Transforming Rehabilitation, a significant increase in adoption cases and reduced staffing and budgets, the Probation and Family Court services are in meltdown. This has been evidenced by repeated HMI Probation reports that highlight workload issues as well as Cafcass figures on workload increases. Urgent action is required by government to review these services in order to maintain public safety and reduce re-offending. If we lose professional standards and highly skilled staff it will be take years to rebuild the services back to an acceptable level.

Napo along with our sister probation union is continuing to gather more statistical information on specific employers, showing the impact of workloads and stress. The results of these surveys will be used to support our campaign and achieve our demands. The first of these, a stress survey conducted across the five Purple Futures owned by Interserve, is attached as appendix 1. The results of future surveys will be shared in due course.

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