

Reasons for a Reunited Probation Service

Briefing 5: NPS is paralysed by bureaucracy, inefficiency and centralisation of process. A one size fits all approach does not work.

Prior to TR there were 35 Probation trusts. Each was closely linked to its local community and was able to commission on a local basis and had full autonomy over service delivery, some staff policies, recruitment and innovation. There was a National Negotiating Committee that focused on national policies such as pay. The National Probation Service was established in 2014 when TR was first being implemented and the workforce and workloads were split. It was some months later that it was absorbed into the civil service.

The NPS is now centrally run on a one size fits all basis. Regions have no autonomy for their local area and instructions are issued from centre to inform policy and practice. This approach simply doesn't work with such a wide range of regions, demographics and infrastructure. As a result, service delivery, interventions, responding to local needs, etc. has been lost.

This centrally run approach has raised the following issues:

- No localism or community engagement. Probation is after all there to serve the communities within which it works and it is vital to have engagement with communities to instil confidence in the work that they do. This is more important with regards to managing high and very high risk of harm offenders.
- No link to local stakeholders and service providers. The NPS is only able to commission 3rd sector interventions via the Community Rehabilitation Companies who charge over the odds for services. This has resulted in the NPS commissioning very few interventions, including at time, domestic violence programmes due to increased costs and very little from 3rd sector or charities. In order to meet the unique needs of their clients and the area they live in, the NPS must be able to commission directly for services they need and to maintain that local engagement with stakeholders.
- A one size fits all model does not work. You cannot run an effective service that doesn't have the flexibility to meet local needs. For example, a model based on London does not transfer to a very rural area such as Cornwall. Infrastructure is different, employment opportunities, ability to get to appointments etc. all vary across different areas.
- The centralisation of probation has led to a duplicate of work. A staggering amount of paperwork to evidence work has been carried out. ICT that doesn't work which led to 2 weeks of no ICT earlier this year. Assessments and targets that are designed by those in HMPPS and the MOJ that are too remote from the frontline and the reality of delivering the work required. This is adding unnecessary pressure on staff. It has led to managers being paralysed to make a policy or staffing decision about their own staff with the default position being to go back to the centre for advice.

Problems with the civil service:

- Previously the probation service has been a non-departmental body of the government. This has given it the distance it needs to run as a criminal justice agency without ministerial interference. Napo is concerned that since becoming part of the civil service this independence has been lost and greater ministerial involvement has significantly changed how the service is delivered and how staff are treated. It has tied the hands of practitioners who now must primarily achieve an ideologically led model rather than best practice.
- The civil service and its HR management in the form of Shared Services does not work for probation. Despite being in the civil service, staff in the NPS are only subject to some policies as their existing terms and conditions transferred with them. This has led to a botched delivery of shared services with mistake being made in pension contributions, pay, and even length of service.
- Napo firmly believes that the probation service should not be bound by civil service codes or governance. As part of the criminal justice system it must have an element of independence and autonomy to deliver a quality service for its communities.

Questions you may wish to ask:

- Why was the NPS absorbed into the civil service and what benefits are there for it remaining within it?
- How has centralisation of probation benefited the clients and communities and how has it improved 3rd sector involvement?
- What plans does the Minister have to improve the involvement of 3rd sector provision within the NPS and does he agree that that would be best achieved through an independent localised service with autonomy to commission locally and to design a service to meet local needs?
- Napo is asking for a reunified publically owned localised probation service. Does the Minister agree that this would resolve a number of issues that have arisen from TR and would free up local services to best deliver for their communities?

Tania Basset

National Official Press, Parliament and Campaigns