

Briefing from Napo, the Trade Union and Professional Association for Probation and Family Court Staff for the Welsh Assembly – May 2014

The Probation Service currently consists of 35 Probation Trusts, with Wales being one of them. The Probation Service is an award winning service that successfully reduces re-offending and currently all 35 Trusts are performing at a good or excellent level. The government plan to privatise 70% of the Probation service by 2015. This will see all Trusts dissolve on the 1st June and be replaced by:

- National Probation Service (NPS) that will deal with all Court duties, parole reports, recall reports and supervise high and very high risk of harm cases.
- 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC) that will supervise the low to medium risk of harm cases. Initially owned by the state with a proposed share sale to the successful bidders in October 2014 and mobilisation of the private companies in 2015.

The changes to the Probation Service are now being implemented with staff being assigned to either the NPS or the CRC's and work is under way to transfer the 250,000 cases. Napo has warned the government repeatedly that these changes will fragment a coherent service and the risk management of dangerous offenders in our communities. This will lead to poor delivery of rehabilitation interventions, higher levels of bureaucracy, increased workloads and ultimately place the public at risk of harm.

Below are some of our key concerns that are now becoming a reality:

- Lack of competition – Earlier this year 30 bidders past the first stage of the competition process and consisted of 50 organisations. Napo believes that this number has reduced as our sources tell us more and more organisations are backing out of the process as details of the chaos emerge. Napo has serious doubts about the validity of any “competition process” as many areas are likely to have less than 3 bidders. Some may have only one bidder. In Wales the bidders are Sodexo, CRI and Working Links. Sodexo are the favourites for the running of the Wrexham Titan prison and have a poor record of prison care. Working Links have a poor record from the Work Programme.
- Staff shortages – across England and Wales there are currently 500 vacancies. This has been caused by posts being frozen while the changes are implemented and staff leaving as a direct result of the government proposals and significant changes to job descriptions and roles. The shortages are in both the NPS and the CRC's. It is leading to significant increases in workload in an already very difficult time for staff trying to implement the staff and case transfer.

- Increased bureaucracy – In order to make the changes workable the MOJ has had to introduce a number of processes such as, assessments to allocate cases to either the NPS or the CRC and assessments for when a person's risk increases and a case may need to be transferred from the CRC to the NPS. This has led to an increase in paperwork for all staff which is reducing the amount of time they have to carry out other key tasks. For example, the case allocation tool completed at the point of sentence has resulted in the number of pre-sentence reports being completed at Court on the same day being reduced from 3 – 2. That is a reduction of a third and has resulted in delaying sentencing. This costs the tax payer money in cases being adjourned for longer, delays closure for victims, prolongs sentencing time for defendants and causes a back log in Court listings.
- Aggressive timetable – The government plans to negotiate and sign off 21, 10 year contracts by October 2014. Given the MOJ's record of contract management, Napo is deeply concerned that this rushed timetable will lead to mistakes in the contracts being made, a lack of detail to the contracts which could lead to contractors increasing their costs after contract signing, length of contracts tying the hands of future governments and unseen costs to the tax payer. These concerns have been echoed by Sadiq Khan (Shadow Justice Secretary) in a letter he wrote to the Permanent Secretary last week.
- Increased workloads and professional burn out – Along with staff shortages, Napo is concerned that the NPS will have significantly more responsibility and work than was originally envisaged, but with far fewer resources. This will lead to staff holding unrealistic caseloads (examples have been coming in from members saying they have now been allocated 80+ high risk of harm cases along with writing pre sentence reports, breach reports, court duty and parole cases). We know from previous investigations such as Sonnex that high caseloads lead to errors being made, increased stress for staff and increase the likelihood of serious further offences being committed. Along with that staff working solely with difficult high risk of harm cases risk professional burn out which will impact on their health, ability to function both in and out of work and may lead to increased sickness and reduce staff retention in the service.
- Service delivery – At least one Trust has had to postpone the supervision of offenders, including high risk of harm, in order to allow staff time to get to know their new caseloads. Staff that have worked effectively in specialist teams have been moved and projects such as Integrated Offender Management, have already been impacted on. Probation work closely with the Police in a number of different teams and it is not yet understood how this work will continue after the changes. Experienced staff are being moved to other areas while less experienced staff are being expected to pick this work up with little or no support. This will impact on multi agency working and will reduce the effectiveness of these currently very successful projects.

It is clear from our ever growing evidence that there are serious operational issues with the implementation of the government's proposals. These seem set to worsen over the coming months as the number of unanswered questions, IT issues and staffing shortages amongst other things bring the system to its knees.

Therefore Napo asks the Welsh Assembly the following:

- To investigate the impact of Transforming Rehabilitation in Wales on offenders supervision, services that are provided such as women's centres, victims and local communities.
- How many vacancies and at what grades are currently open in Wales Probation Trust and the timescale they will be filled?
- Present a motion in support of Napo's campaign and opposing Transforming Rehabilitation at the next Assembly meeting.

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