

Napo Parliamentary Report

August 2025 to July 2026

Contents

Summary and overview	1
Probation workloads, staffing, morale and retention	4
Family courts	29

Summary and overview

A dramatic year in British politics culminated in Andy Burnham becoming Prime Minister at the end of July 2026, as MPs left Westminster for Summer Recess, replacing Keir Starmer barely two years after he'd led Labour to a landslide general election victory. Starmer's deep and widespread unpopularity, blamed for huge losses at May's local elections to both Reform UK and the Greens, convinced Labour MPs it was time for change at the top, and Burnham's by-election win in Makerfield two months later was seen as "proof of concept" that unlocked the door to No. 10.

Immediately on entering Downing St, Burnham was ambushed by the prisons capacity crisis, inheriting the imminent early release of hundreds of prisoners due to the Sentencing Act 2026, which had been fiercely debated in Parliament throughout the past year. The Act introduced a presumption against short sentences and reduced time served in prison to a third, followed by "intensive supervision" in the community, after recommendations by former Conservative Justice Secretary David Gauke in his Independent Sentencing Review. Although the Act piles yet more pressure on a Probation Service already on its knees and shifts the prison overcrowding crisis on to probation, little thought has been given to building resilience inside the service by improving staff retention and morale, sparking disputes with the unions and an increased 2025–26 pay offer in March after Napo threatened industrial action. As highlighted in last year's report, the Government's manifesto promise of "a strategic review of probation governance" with a focus on "the benefits of devolved models" is still nowhere to be seen.

To advance parliamentary campaigning, Napo continues to co-sponsor the Justice Unions Parliamentary Group alongside sister unions POA, PCS, UCU and the Police Federation of England & Wales, with secretariat support from Solidarity Consulting. Napo press releases, reports and briefings, including top lines, background info and suggested questions/actions, are regularly circulated to Group members, encouraging them to participate in relevant debates and to table and support selected motions and amendments. The Group reconstituted as an All-Party Parliamentary Group with new co-sponsors RCN and the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies in September 2026, after the period covered by this report. Liz Saville Roberts, MP for Dwyfor Meirionnydd and Westminster leader of Plaid Cymru, remains as chair and former Unite general secretary Lord Woodley (Labour), Richard Burgon (Labour, Leeds East) and Conservative Lord Balfe are vice-chairs. All previous members (totalling over 150) remain as either members of the new JUAPPG or supporters who receive regular circulars.

In September 2025 the MOJ ministerial team saw a shake-up sparked by the resignation of Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) as Deputy Prime Minister – with David Lammy (Tottenham) taking this role and moving from Foreign Secretary to Justice Secretary, replacing Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham Ladywood), who became the new Home Secretary. Mahmood replaced Yvette Cooper (Pontefract, Castleford & Knottingley), who herself replaced Lammy as Foreign Secretary, completing this triangular reshuffle. Lord James Timpson stayed on as Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, as did Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) as Victims Minister and Sarah Sackman (Finchley & Golders Green) as Courts Minister, but new junior ministers Jake Richards (Rother Valley) and former judge Baroness Levitt replaced Sir Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe), who became a whip, and former JUPG co-chair Lord Ponsonby. Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) joined the team as a junior minister in May after Davies-Jones resigned in the “palace coup” against Starmer. A further reshuffle took place when Andy Burnham became PM in July, with Alex Norris (Nottingham North & Kimberley) appointed Justice Secretary and Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) replacing Lord Timpson as minister.

For the Opposition, Robert Jenrick (Newark) resigned as the Conservatives’ shadow justice secretary when he defected to Reform UK in January, replaced by Nick Timothy (West Suffolk), while former Justice Committee member Kieran Mullan (Bexhill & Battle) continues as shadow prisons minister and former justice minister Lord Keen of Elie as the shadow minister in the Lords. Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) replaced Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) as Lib-Dem justice spokesperson in October after Babarinde was elected party president.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith & Chiswick) remained as chair of the Justice Committee throughout this period – until his appointment by Burnham as Solicitor General in July – alongside fellow Labour MPs Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West), Sarah Russell (Congleton), Pam Cox (Colchester) and Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean), joined by Tony Vaughan (Folkestone & Hythe) in October and Janet Daby (Lewisham East), who replaced Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) in June. Conservatives Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) and Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) remain members, as does Lib-Dems Tessa Munt (Wells & Mendip Hills), with her colleague Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset & North Poole) replacing Babarinde in November.

After advice from Napo, JUPG members tabled several amendments to the Sentencing Bill on probation capacity, unpaid work privatisation and insourcing electronic monitoring. The passage of the Bill was the perfect opportunity to speak up for probation officers and the urgent need to improve their pay, terms and conditions, with Labour’s Grahame Morris (Easington) highlighting at [Second Reading](#) in September how “attrition rates – the rates of skilled probation officers leaving the service – are appalling”, insisting:

Grahame Morris: *That is unsurprising, given the unbearable workloads for staff on top of 15 years of real-terms pay cuts and a degradation in the service presided over by the previous Administration. I am also told that the Government still have not made a formal pay offer to probation staff this year, so I respectfully encourage Ministers to reflect on how best to hold on to these key workers, who perform such a vital and demanding role.*

At [Committee of the Whole House](#) the following month, Liz Saville Roberts spoke to her amendment on probation capacity, which would give new powers to the Inspectorate such as imposing prioritisation frameworks on overstretched units. She told MPs that, “last week, I had the honour of addressing the annual conference of the probation officers union, Napo, in my capacity as co-chair of the Justice Unions Parliamentary Group”, revealing:

Liz Saville Roberts: *Speaker after speaker at the conference, including Chief Inspector Martin Jones, warned that probation officers are under unprecedented pressure and simply cannot cope with their current workload. Staff are genuinely worried that the Bill will make that already acute problem worse and will risk destabilising the service further, which will lead to a greater risk to public protection. That is why, as is proposed in new clause 4, an independent assessment of whether the Probation Service has the capability and the capacity to take on additional work is vital.*

Later in the debate, former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell (Labour, Hayes & Harlington) highlighted how his amendment on preventing private companies profiting from community service had been drafted in light of the disaster of Serco taking over unpaid work in London in 2013. He explained that, “during that period, the National Association of Probation Officers expressed to the Government its opposition to privatisation, and took action by referring the matter to the International Labour Organisation, as a breach of the ILO’s convention on forced labour”. He continued:

John McDonnell: *The ILO found in favour of the union, framing its judgment in this way: “All work or service that is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself” or herself voluntarily is forced labour. It made an exception of “work as a consequence of a conviction in a court of law”. However, the ILO also said that the person must not be “hired or placed at the disposal of private individuals, companies or associations”. The union is seeking an assurance from the Government that they will abide by the ILO convention, and will not place this forced labour with private companies, as that would enable those companies to profiteer from those workers, and would prevent those who want a job from being hired legitimately.*

After the Bill moved to the Lords, JUPG co-chair Lord Woodley tabled the same Napo-inspired amendments, [explaining in December](#) that, “currently, only the people running local probation units can trigger special measures and what is called the prioritisation framework. This has given rise to accusations that they are marking their own homework.” He continued:

Lord Woodley: *My amendment seeks to share that power with the Chief Inspector of Probation. Prioritisation is an important safety valve to stop probation units from being swamped, but sometimes an outside perspective is needed to gauge this accurately and honestly, for obvious reasons. It is widely accepted that the Probation Service is under extreme pressure—there is no doubt at all about that—and this Bill will only add to those pressures.*

And he paid tribute to the probation officer stabbed the previous week in Oxford while supervising an offender, telling Peers: “I commend his bravery and fortitude. Thankfully, he was not critically injured. We wish him a complete and fully supported recovery.” Woodley continued:

Lord Woodley: *Beyond the immediate harm that was caused, this incident—the second such attack recently, as an officer was stabbed in Preston in August—underscores the increasing risk faced by probation officers and the crisis of prison violence spilling over into probation. Not surprisingly, staff morale and retention have collapsed, made worse by over a decade of real-terms pay cuts while case loads have soared to unimaginable levels, and worse is yet to come.*

Other relevant contributions from debates are highlighted below. Family courts also came under the parliamentary microscope during this period, starting with a [Justice Committee session](#) in October, followed by numerous questions at March's [Justice Questions](#) (see below). The JUPG (now JUAPPG) will continue to campaign for better pay, terms and conditions for Napo members, and for the Probation Service and family courts to be properly resourced and fully functioning.

Probation workloads, staffing, morale and retention

Widespread concerns over probation capacity have been raised numerous times in both Houses by members of all parties, including during the passage of the Sentencing Bill and at regular Justice Questions. At the [first JQs](#) after Summer Recess (16 September 2025), Justice Committee chair Andy Slaughter noted that the Government were “recruiting new probation officers to fulfil the new responsibilities under the Sentencing Bill and to deal with early release”, but warned Justice Secretary David Lammy:

Andy Slaughter: *The BBC recently reported, however, a shortage of 10,000 probation officers. How are we going to fill that gap? The Probation Service is absolutely essential to the strategy that he is rightly following now.*

Pointing out “the Probation Service was decimated by a badly botched privatisation that ruined such an incredible service”, Lammy agreed “we will need to recruit more officers”, insisting that “the £700 million that we found is essential, and I will be looking closely at the allocations over the coming months”.

Later that day, MPs had their [first opportunity](#) to debate the Sentencing Bill itself. Slaughter noted how the Bill “shifts the focus from custodial sentences to dealing with offenders in the community”, adding: “It is paramount, therefore, that probation services are adequately funded to manage the substantial increase in workload.” He continued:

Andy Slaughter: *There are several measures in the Bill that will increase the pressure on probation services. These include a statutory presumption to suspend custodial sentences of 12 months or less; an extension of the availability of suspended sentences to three years rather than two; and new community orders, including those that ban offenders from public events and drinking establishments, prohibit offenders from driving and impose restriction zones on them. In the 2023-24 annual report and accounts for the Prison and Probation Service, the overall annual leaving rate for Probation Service staff was over 10%. His Majesty's inspectorate of probation said: “High workloads and a lack of support are critical factors in driving practitioners away from their roles”. A report leaked to the BBC estimated that there is currently a shortfall of around 10,000 probation staff, which is four or five times the number being recruited.*

And he added that the extra funding pledged at the spending review “will be vital in filling the shortfall and increasing staff retention”. Next, Lib-Dem spokesperson Josh Babarinde welcomed “the reasonable and proportionate use of robust community sentences and licence conditions in the context of the earned progression model, but the Probation Service must have the tools it needs to manage this”, adding:

Josh Babarinde: *I am sure we will hear again that the Government have pledged £700 million to the Probation Service to help enhance its capacity, but how will they resolve the 2,315 full-time equivalent shortfall in probation officers by next spring when those measures are set to be enacted?*

Calling the Bill “a bold step towards easing the pressure on our overcrowded prisons and repairing a criminal justice system so badly broken by the Conservative party’s agenda of economically illiterate austerity”, Grahame Morris warned: “Concerns have been expressed to me by the trade unions – including Napo, which represents probation staff, especially – on the extra workload that the Bill will mean for their members. I say respectfully to the Minister and to the Justice Secretary that I hope they will engage fully with the justice unions as the Bill progresses in order to address these legitimate concerns in good faith.” He continued:

Grahame Morris: *Probation staff have long complained that rehabilitation activity requirements and post-sentence supervision, which are leftovers from the previous Government’s failed privatisation experiment, are ineffective and time-consuming. Napo is therefore relieved to see the Bill abolish them for good. Although it is true that this will free up more staff time, the Bill still puts additional pressure on the Probation Service. Yes, the extra resources already announced by Ministers will help to bring more staff into the service, but what will make them stay?*

John McDonnell also warned about probation understaffing, telling MPs: “On the sentence management process, all the advice we get from Napo, which represents probation officers, shows that there is a shortfall of about 10,000 staff, exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick said.” He continued:

John McDonnell: *The morale in the service itself—remember that probation officers have gone through privatisation, and then been brought back as a public service—is pretty low. They are very committed professionals, but having wages stagnate for a long period has had its effect, and recruitment and retention is a real issue that we need to address. I would not underestimate the stress they are under at the moment. We welcome the additional resource, but realistically there is a demand for more that we need to take on board.*

And having been tipped off by Napo about the potential role of private companies in new unpaid work schemes, he raised concerns over how this would operate:

John McDonnell: *Another issue that has been discussed is the supervision of unpaid work. I am really worried that there are discussions about privatising that again. In London, we had the experience of Serco a number of years ago when it was privatised. To be frank, it was an absolute disaster. I am worried that it could be interpreted as simply exploiting prisoners for private profit in some instances.*

Other MPs raised concerns over probation funding, including Justice Committee member Linsey Farnsworth, who insisted that, “regardless of their goodwill and no matter how hard they work, probation officers cannot do their jobs effectively without proper resources. It is clear that the Probation Service has been working for many years on extremely limited resources, and we cannot let that continue under the measures in the Bill.” She added:

Linsey Farnsworth: *Many of the recommendations of the independent sentencing review are carried forward in the Bill. Importantly, the review noted specifically that probation officers “should be provided with the time, resources and autonomy necessary to build meaningful relationships with offenders and discharge this new responsibility to determine the appropriate content of probation requirements.” Justice, the cross-party law reform and human rights charity, has also outlined concerns about shortfalls of probation staff, including a deficit of around 10,000 Probation Service staff in August this year. The charity suggests that despite more Probation Service officers being appointed in the last year, the target staffing level of full-time equivalent probation officers has not yet been met.*

Winding up the debate, Justice Minister Jake Richards noted that probation “certainly could not cope under the Tories, with a botched part-privatisation that cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of pounds and a persistent shortage of staff,” adding:

Jake Richards: *We are very aware of the pressures the Probation Service faces, especially after the damage done by the last Conservative Government. That is why we are investing £8 million in new technology to lift the administrative burdens on probation officers and enable them to refocus their time on where it has the greatest impact. I joined the Justice Secretary on his first visit to speak to probation staff, and they told us how important that technological change could be to the work they do. However, that is not enough, and as I have said, we are increasing funding by £700 million—a 45% increase—and hiring more probation officers. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) raised the issue of trade unions, and the challenges that this new sentencing regime will place on probation officers. I reassure him that I and the Justice Secretary will be having conversations with the trade unions throughout this process.*

With the Government rushing the legislation through as quickly as possible, the traditional Bill Committee to scrutinise laws line by line and discuss all amendments was replaced by a one-day [Committee of the Whole House](#) (21 October), with all MPs theoretically able to contribute. Ahead of Committee, McDonnell tabled an [amendment](#) that “would prohibit private sector involvement in unpaid work as part of a community sentence”, while JUPG co-chair Liz Saville Roberts proposed a [new clause](#) on capacity that “would ensure that the provisions of this Bill likely to increase demand on the Probation Service cannot be implemented until HM Inspectorate of Probation determines that there is adequate capacity to address those demands, and would enable the Inspectorate to trigger the issuing of a prioritisation framework to help local areas to identify which activities to deprioritise”. Both amendments were suggested by Napo and debated at Committee, while another union concern – the “naming and shaming” of people serving community sentences, complete with published photographs – was addressed by Andy Slaughter at the debate:

Andy Slaughter: *My next amendment, amendment 32, relates to clause 35, which amends the sentencing code to allow for the publication of the photographs and names of offenders serving community sentences. The explanatory notes say very little about this clause, but the justification in the memorandum on human rights suggests that the Government believe that this measure will have a deterrent effect on criminals, although there is little evidence for that assertion. The measure engages the article 8 right to private and family life for the individual, their victims and their family. Some concerns have been raised about how this measure can be operated safely in the modern social media age, in which photographs and names can be readily and quickly shared.*

My amendment would prevent clause 35 from being brought into force until the Secretary of State has issued a code of practice to providers of probation services about how to take and publish photographs lawfully in the light of the Human Rights Act 1998 and data protection legislation. Before issuing a code of practice, the Secretary of State must consult providers of probation services, lay a draft before Parliament, and obtain the approval of both Houses. That would ensure proper parliamentary oversight of this measure.

Grahame Morris explained that “my intention is to support the Bill, but also to seek to improve it”, highlighting how “I have had extensive discussions with the justice unions, notably the prison officers in the Prison Officers Association, probation officers in Napo, prison educators in the University and College Union and, indeed, staff in the PCS union”. Speaking to Saville Roberts’s amendment, Morris noted it “calls for probation to receive a clean bill of health by His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation before any increase in pressure on the service. It also provides a much-needed power to trigger what is called a prioritisation framework, so if there are serious concerns about a particular region’s or unit’s capability, probation officers can focus on high-risk cases

instead of non-essential tasks.” Insisting that these powers “are just the sort of safeguards we need in the Bill before more pressure is placed on the Probation Service”, he continued:

Grahame Morris: *I am pleased to register my support for new clause 3, in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who is my good friend. I echo the concerns that he expressed at length on Second Reading about the potential for exploitation by private companies, such as when unpaid work in London was privatised in 2013. Indeed, that was criticised by the International Labour Organisation as an abuse. Does the Minister agree with the probation union, Napo, that unpaid work orders should always be about payback to the community, that they should be run for public good, not for private profit, and that this safeguard should be placed in the Bill?*

After sharing her experiences speaking at Napo conference the previous week, Liz Saville Roberts highlighted how “there is no escaping the fact that the Bill will heap extra pressure on the Probation Service, which is slowly coming back from being on its knees following Transforming Rehabilitation under the last Government”. She continued:

Liz Saville Roberts: *New clause 4, which is fully supported by Napo, would require the inspectorate’s approval to be provided before extra pressure is placed on our overstretched Probation Service by provisions in the Bill. It would also empower the inspectorate to trigger special measures for probation delivery units or entire regions, and a prioritisation framework that would give probation officers more flexibility to focus on high-risk cases and drop the non-essential and lower-priority tasks that take up so much of their time. Since those years when there was so much pressure on the Probation Service, probation officers have effectively been penalised for their willingness to take responsibility for risky decisions, which we are going to require them to make. If we are to enable probation officers to do their work more effectively, we must give them the capacity to think through the risks in order to be prepared not to go ahead on the safest possible route.*

Currently, only regional probation directors have the power to ask for their region or unit to be put into the prioritisation framework, the criteria for which I am told is based solely on the number of probation officers. Napo believes that criterion to be wholly inadequate, as it does not take into account the grades of the staff or their workloads, and that it must be broadened to take into account probation officers’ day-to-day workload. Resting such powers with directors also disincentivises the triggering of special measures because it leads to accusations of their being allowed to mark their own homework. If the inspectorate had that power instead, there could be an objective, holistic assessment of the full capacity of that area, which would include much broader criteria than is currently the case. I sincerely hope that the Government will listen and support the spirit, if not the specific text, of new clause 4.

Also fully briefed by Solidarity Consulting, after detailed discussions with Napo members at the union’s annual conference in Eastbourne the previous week, John McDonnell laid out the arguments against letting private companies profit from unpaid work – noting that, “like others in the Chamber, I am a member of the Justice Unions Parliamentary Group”. He continued:

John McDonnell: *As many Members know, the justice unions group comprises the probation officers’ union, Napo, as well as the Prison Officers Association and the PCS. It acts as the voice of the frontline workers in Parliament from those particular unions. There is an overall welcoming of the Bill by the unions themselves, which is good, but a specific concern has been raised with us with regard to the development of unpaid work and community service, and how that is managed in the future. Many Members will also know about the history of community service; in fact, in the past we have had a few Members in this House who did a bit of community service—but that is another issue altogether.*

Historically, it has been a way in which people have been able to avoid prison sentences: by working in the community and making reparation for the damage that they have often caused in it. I think we can report that it has been relatively successful in most of our constituencies.

Unfortunately, though, there have been experiments with privatisation, including of the management of the service; and there has been debate about whether this could be unpaid labour for private companies. In London, in 2013, community service was privatised to Serco. It was an absolute disaster. There was a lack of supervision on site, a lack of workers, and a lack of tools being delivered. It was also exposed that offenders were sometimes being crammed into vehicles that were unsuitable and unsafe. As a result, that privatisation collapsed. The last Government then engaged in a wholesale privatisation of probation, under the title, Transforming Rehabilitation. That included unpaid work and community service. Again, even the last Government had to accept that probation would have to be brought back in house because of a combination of incompetence and profiteering, alongside a failure to go for realistically effective rehabilitation.

Explaining that Napo “also asks that we prevent a repetition of the disaster of privatisation. It says that if there is an increase in community sentences, there obviously has to be adequate staffing through the Probation Service, as has been said, and recognition of the failure of the private sector to manage this process in the past,” McDonnell continued:

John McDonnell: *The union wants to remind Members that there is a requirement for supervision to be adequately staffed, because there is a concern about the nature of unpaid labour placements and how they will be supervised in future. There are already concerns about what is happening; we are dealing with cases involving people who have committed knife crime, domestic violence or stalking, and there are issues with the mental health of some of the offenders being supervised, as well as drug-related issues. There is a fear of heightened risk if privatisation is attempted again, and if private companies offer placements in their companies for the sake of profiteering. All new clause 3 seeks is an assurance from the Minister, preferably in the Bill, that unpaid work will be undertaken only for non-profit organisations. In the past, such work has been undertaken for these bodies, including social enterprises, voluntary organisations and, yes, local authorities, working with local community initiatives. The private sector should never be allowed to profit from such work.*

Anna Dixon (Labour, Shipley): *I welcome my right hon. Friend's clarification that charities would still be able to provide these placements. I have a fantastic charity in my constituency, upCYCLE, which teaches bike maintenance skills to help rehabilitate people. Currently, that is done in prisons, but when there are more community sentences, that sort of charity will want to give people skills and meaningful work in the community. I just want to clarify that this is not about excluding charities.*

John McDonnell: *That is exactly in the tradition of community service as it was founded and developed over the years, but the experiments with privatisation have been a disaster. There is an argument that once a system starts using the private sector, as in America, offenders become economic units for exploitation and profiteering. The Justice Unions Parliamentary Group warns that we should not venture down that path, both as a result of historical failures, and given what has happened in other countries when the private sector has been able to use offenders in that way. The new clause is about returning to the traditional community service approach in this country. It was relatively effective, but in this new Sentencing Bill, which we welcome, it will be expanded on a scale perhaps not envisaged in the past. It is as simple as that. [...]*

My final point relates not to new clause 3, but to the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) on the naming and shaming of offenders and the idea that offenders' photographs will be publicised locally. He suggests in his amendments that there should be much wider consultation on the issue, and probation officers are saying exactly the same thing. A lot of their role in rehabilitation is about ensuring that people have a connection with their families once again. They are concerned about the effect that naming and shaming has on the family, and in particular the children. Sometimes, the family serves the sentence alongside the offender, and we would not want any actions taken that increase the stigma for family members of offenders. If the Government are going down this path, there is a need for more detailed and widespread consultation and discussion.

None of the amendments was taken to the vote, but [McDonnell](#) and [Saville Roberts](#) retabled theirs ahead of the [final debate](#) on the Bill the following week (29 October), at Remaining Stages (Report and Third Reading). McDonnell kicked off his speech by reminding MPs that his amendment “represented the views of a number of organisations, including the National Association of Probation Officers, recalling the problems that we faced with privatisation, particularly in relation to community service and unpaid work”. He repeated:

John McDonnell: *In London in 2013, the supervision of unpaid work was privatised to Serco, and it was a catastrophic failure in providing both effective work and security for the community overall. It left a stain on the old process of managing community work. That was reflected when the previous Government totally privatised probation, which then had to be brought back in-house. New clause 26 simply asks for an assurance from the Government that, although we will want to engage with voluntary organisations, charities and non-profit bodies, we will not seek the privatisation of community service and unpaid work, in particular the placement of former prisoners in work in which they could be exploited.*

Liz Saville Roberts: *I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who I am sure will join me in supporting my new clauses 27 and 28, and new clause 25 in the name of the hon. Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson). My new clauses relate to probation capacity and the devolution of probation services to Wales, but in Committee we had no feedback whatsoever from the Minister at the close of the day. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that those four new clauses, including his own, warrant a response from the Minister?*

John McDonnell: *That is why I tabled my new clause in Committee. I did not want to be a pain in the neck; I just wanted the Minister to acknowledge our understanding of the implications of the measures and the Probation Service's overall concerns about these matters. I have re-tabled the new clause simply to get the Minister's view and to hear the Government's attitude on those issues. A range of amendments have come from the Justice Unions Parliamentary Group, which the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) chairs. Let me be absolutely clear: community service has always been state-supervised work with charities and non-profit organisations. At no stage do we want to allow private sector organisations to profiteer in that area of service. No matter what attitude the Minister takes, I hope that he can give us an assurance on that. If there is a need for further discussion and dialogue, I am sure that the Justice Unions Parliamentary Group will be willing to meet him to go through those issues in more detail.*

Andy Slaughter: *My right hon. Friend makes a good point. Although commercial organisations may well be able to run community schemes, it is clear that the ambition of voluntary organisations is rehabilitation and the prevention of reoffending, and that really must be the goal of community sentencing, which is at the heart of the Bill.*

John McDonnell: *I can only draw on the experience that my hon. Friend and I had when Serco was in charge, which was about profiteering and reducing costs, largely through a reduction in staff. He might recall that on occasion we had reports that community service volunteers were turning up, and the tools were not available for them to do their work. There was a lack of supervision, and in a few instances we discovered that some of the vehicles that they used had been forced into and were unsafe. We do not want to go back to that profiteering. That is why an assurance that this provision will be managed and orientated by the state, using non-profit-making voluntary organisations and charities, would reassure those professionals who have unfortunately experienced the privatisation that has taken place in the past, to the detriment of us all.*

Again, none of the amendments was selected for a vote. At the next [Justice Questions](#) (11 November), Catherine Atkinson also cautioned against private sector involvement in probation, pointing out that “the Conservatives’ part-privatisation reforms were disastrous for our Probation Service” and asking:

Catherine Atkinson: *What are this Government doing to ensure that our probation officers are properly supported in carrying out their vital jobs?*

David Lammy: *My hon. Friend is exactly right. The decisions that were made under the last Government by the then Justice Secretary, Chris Grayling, were catastrophic for a wonderful service, and we are now in the business of rebuilding the Probation Service. I have been very pleased to visit probation workers in Chatham, Kent, and in Islington recently, and one of the things they raise is their caseload. In Kent they were trialling our transformation fund money, which is introducing artificial intelligence that can help them do what they want to do: provide face-to-face contact and reduce their caseloads. I want to see that rolled out across the country.*

New Lib-Dem spokesperson Jess Brown-Fuller highlighted how, “like much of the justice system, the Probation Service is buckling under the strain after a decade of being undervalued by the previous Government”, adding:

Jess Brown-Fuller: *The injection of £700 million by 2028 was welcomed last year, but it has yet to be felt on the frontline of probation, which is estimated to be 10,000 staff members short. Given that the Sentencing Bill and a presumption against short sentences are bound to put additional pressure on the Probation Service, what is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that the service can work efficiently to properly manage offenders in the community?*

David Lammy: *I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue. It was important that we exceeded our target of 1,000 officers last year, and we have to get those 1,300 officers in place. The £700 million must be spent by the end of the spending review. It is important that we bear down on getting AI across the service and that we introduce new technology, because it is only by doing so that probation officers can do what they want to do: get back to face-to-face and personalised care.*

The following day (12 November), the Sentencing Bill had its [first debate](#) (Second Reading) in the Lords, with Minister Timpson admitting that “more punishment in the community, more intensive supervision, more monitoring and restrictions: these will all put more pressure on our already stretched Probation Service”. He continued:

Lord Timpson: *That is why the recent spending review announced up to £700 million extra for probation. That is a 45% uplift by the final year, the largest in history, because we are*

investing in what makes a difference; investing in what cuts crime and rehabilitates offenders; and investing to support the staff.

But Conservative shadow minister Lord Sandhurst pointed out that probation “is already overstretched, under-staffed and struggling to manage risk. The Government’s own impact assessment concedes that an additional 580 officers will be required each year, at a cost of £30 million a year – funding that simply does not exist in the current settlement.” And the Lord Bishop of Gloucester, prisons bishop Rachel Treweek, highlighted how “creativity with community sentencing could be life-changing, but, sadly, even the proposed changes are set within such a punitive framework and tone” – insisting that “this is pandering to public opinion, not changing it”. She continued:

Lord Bishop of Gloucester: *On that note, measures to name and shame people completing unpaid work as part of their community sentence need greater scrutiny. I am sure that the last thing the Government would intend is harmful consequences for thousands of children and young people whose parents are completing their sentence. I applaud the skills and professionalism of our probation officers, and I am glad to see the rehabilitation activity requirement replaced by a probation requirement. But, to be effective, resource must continue to be increased, such that money currently wasted on inappropriate prison sentences is redirected to the recruitment, training and retention of dedicated probation staff and, indeed, prison staff. If prison sentences are going to be restorative, the recruitment, training, valuing and retention of prison and probation staff are vital.*

Labour’s Lord Bach highlighted how “probation has been to hell and back again over the last 15 years or so; experiments that Dr Frankenstein would have been proud of have been tried on it. In a way, it is a bit of a miracle that it is still with us—but it is, and its role is essential to the success or failure of the new sentencing policy as set out in the Bill.” He continued:

Lord Bach: *We are asking the Probation Service to play the leading role in changing people’s lives around, while satisfying the public that they are being protected. The service needs sustaining and strengthening, in numbers and in funding if more is to be maintained. My concern is that the money pledged until 2029, which is generous, will frankly not be enough if we are to make a success of the Bill and the excellent independent review that was its parent. Government must recognise this as early as possible.*

Crossbencher Baroness Prashar, a member of the Justice and Home Affairs Committee, insisted that, “while greater use of community orders is desirable, we also know that, as others have said, their full potential will not be maximised until the Probation Service is fully functional”, adding:

Baroness Prashar: *The Government’s commitment to invest £700 million is welcome, but there will be a shortfall of staff and a time lag in getting staff levels and training up to speed to meet the Bill’s expectations. Furthermore, the Probation Service needs community-based voluntary organisations to be effective. When services are provided locally, various agencies can co-operate effectively. In [our report](#), we argue: “The colocation and co-commissioning of services are the gold standard”. Investment in the Probation Service and community-based organisations is crucial if we are to maintain public trust in community sentences.*

Recognising that “the Government are between a rock and a hard place”, crossbencher Lord Carter of Haslemere noted that, “on the one hand, they need to release more prisoners early so as to create more capacity and, on the other, they risk putting so much pressure on the Probation Service that a large number of released prisoners will be recalled to prison, thereby defeating the whole point of Clause 20”. He added:

Lord Carter: *I do not know the answer to this in the short term, which must surely depend partly on a vast injection of new probation resources, the like of which we have never seen. Even then, you cannot wave a magic wand to produce overnight significantly more trained probation officers with the experience to deal with the increased burden.*

Justice and Home Affairs Committee chair, Lib-Dem Lord Foster of Bath, warned that “the greatest concern is in relation to the Probation Service”, adding:

Lord Forster: *The Bill will require the Probation Service to manage many more issues, including a large increase in the number of community orders and a near doubling of the number of people being tagged. Yet the Probation Service is already facing significant shortfalls in staffing and so is unable to do all of what is already being asked of it. A community sentence order is rarely given without a pre-sentence report, yet, because of staff shortages, the number of such reports has fallen dramatically. How can the Bill expect a significant increase in the preparation of such reports if the service cannot even cope with the current demand? So there is an urgent need to address staffing and retention in the Probation Service to cope with more pre-sentence reports, more supervision of those on community orders and more supervision of those who are going to be tagged. Without it, the Probation Service is being set up to fail.*

The Government of course increased staff numbers by 1,000 last year and has promised a further 1,300 this year, but these numbers, even with better use of new technology, are unlikely to meet the demand, which some estimates suggest may be as many as 10,000. As he did in his opening remarks, the Minister may well point to the promised £700 million over four years, but we still have no clarity on how much of that will be spent on additional staff and their training. I hope the Minister will provide that clarity at the end of the debate, but, with much of the money likely to be spent on housing, it is therefore unlikely there will be enough to boost staffing to the level required by the Bill’s proposals.

JUPG co-chair Lord Woodley called the Bill “a logical and rational response to the serious problems of prison overcrowding and of years, even decades, of sentence inflation” but revealed “concerns with the Bill expressed to me by the justice unions, especially Napo”. He continued:

Lord Woodley: *I echo the concerns raised in the other place on probation capacity, unpaid work and electronic monitoring, following warnings by Napo, which led to three amendments tabled, as the Minister knows, at Committee and Report stages. The first of these gave the chief inspector the power to delay any aspect of the Bill that places extra pressure on probation until the service is indeed ready. The second stopped the private sector profiting from the expansion of unpaid work orders or community sentences, which are only run by the Probation Service, charities, local authorities or other non-profit organisations. The third aimed to bring tagging operations into the public sector Probation Service and out of the hands of the failing and corrupt privateers, such as Serco and G4S. On this point, I note last week’s letter to Ministers from the Justice and Home Affairs Committee warning that probation is being “set up to fail” with electronic monitoring. It also called for an independent review on tagging “with a view to operating parallel contracts managed by a fully funded and supported Probation Service”—something staff would very much agree with; I have no doubt about that.*

I raise these points today because, unfortunately, none of the concerns was addressed during the debates in the other place, nor has the promised union meeting with Commons Ministers materialised. That is what I believe. I hope that, by my putting all this on record, the Minister will appreciate the depth of feeling among front-line staff on these issues and seek to reassure them appropriately.

Crossbencher Lord Hastings of Scarisbrick focused on the naming and shaming, insisting: “That can never be right” and adding:

Lord Hastings: *Any one of us who has worked with people who have had a community sentence, who are working through it to change and improve their lives and who are doing their duty fairly, know that to shame them in public is to destroy their relationships and community place, to see them at high risk and to put their children at severe risk. That is just bad politics and needs to be taken out of the Bill.*

Lib-Dem spokesperson Lord Marks of Henley-on-Thames insisted that “central to the success of the Bill and the Government in their aims will be resourcing the Probation Service”, adding:

Lord Marks: *The Government plan, as we have heard, to recruit 13,000 more probation officers by March next year and are allocating an additional £700 million to the Probation Service by 2028. However, we are seriously concerned that these figures do not add up, as my noble friend Lord Foster explained in detail—the noble Lord, Lord Bach, and others expressed the same doubts. Do the figures take into account three areas of extra costs arising from this Bill: more tagging; implementation of the presumption against immediate short sentences; and extra supervision of early releases on the earned progression model?*

And he added his criticism of the naming and shaming, highlighting how the Lib-Dems “also reject the notion of publicly shaming offenders undertaking unpaid work with names and photographs. It is vindictive and unhelpful – a point made by the noble Lord, Lord Hastings.”

Winding up, Minister Timpson highlighted how “the Probation Service is an indispensable part of the criminal justice system that keeps us safe, but the last decade has been a very challenging time”, adding: “We have already taken significant steps to focus resources on the highest-risk and prolific offenders, where the evidence shows that probation can have the greatest impact.” Claiming that “recruitment, retention and training of staff are high priorities for the Probation Service”, he tried to address Bishop Rachel’s concerns:

Lord Timpson: *The right reverend Prelate is clearly aware that we need to ensure that we have sufficient workforce to safely supervise and manage people in the community. This Bill includes several measures, such as welcoming the removal of post-sentence supervision, the introduction of a new probation requirement, and the termination of community orders once an offender has completed their sentence plan. These will streamline processes, enable probation to focus its efforts on those who pose the highest risk, and incentivise offenders to engage with rehabilitation.*

The Bill was debated in [Committee](#) later that month (26 November), with Lord Woodley tabling the Napo-inspired amendments from the Commons. Kicking off the debate, Minister Timpson pointed out: “It is absolutely clear that the last Government left our Probation Service under immense pressure. Fourteen years of austerity came alongside a botched privatisation. The scars are still there, and we are fixing it.” But his shadow, Lord Keen, insisted that “much of the Bill will simply shift the burdens facing prison staff on to a Probation Service that is already under severe strain. It will be the Probation Service that is required to manage a much-expanded cohort of offenders in the community.”

Woodley’s [first amendment](#), on unpaid work, was reached on the [second day of Committee](#) (1 December), with former TUC general secretary Lord Barber of Ainsdale moving it on his behalf. Barber started by highlighting how, “as a lifelong trade unionist, I have seen too often the damaging impact that privatisation can have on public services; in pursuit of maximising profit, costs are too often cut to the bone, often starting with workers’ pay, terms and conditions. The

quality of service goes down, while the cost to the taxpayer goes up, and we are left with the worst of both worlds.” He continued:

Lord Barber: *Privatisation has failed especially badly when it comes to the justice system. Probation is the classic example: it was part-privatised by the last Government, who had to renationalise it five years later because the service was close to collapse. Take prisons: private prisons are on average 47% more violent than public prisons, according to research published by the Guardian. Yet still we build more of them, with, of the three new prisons announced by the Government, two to be run for profit. Quite apart from the practical problems that come with outsourcing, it seems to me to be morally wrong for private companies to profit from prisons or probation, or indeed any part of our precious justice system. With this in mind, Amendment 77 seeks to address concerns that the Ministry of Justice is preparing to let private companies profit from unpaid work orders, also known as community service.*

This issue has been highlighted by Napo, the probation staff union. The union even told me that large, profitable supermarkets and high street bakery companies had expressed an interest in exploiting this free labour. Since then, as the Bill has made its way through the other place, the same concern was raised strongly and still Ministers have not yet ruled out this option. Noble Lords should recall that community service in London was privatised in 2013 and it was an utter disaster. There was a lack of supervision on sites, a lack of workers, a lack of tools, and offenders were sometimes crammed into unsuitable and unsafe vehicles. Napo took action by referring the matter to the International Labour Organization as a breach of the Forced Labour Convention. The ILO found in favour of the union and, as noted earlier, that privatisation collapsed. All this amendment would do is add a simple safeguard to the Bill, which would mean that only non-profit organisations such as charities, social enterprises and local authorities would be able to oversee this unpaid work. I hope your Lordships agree that this is a sensible and reasonable safeguard as we expand this form of punishment.

However, shadow minister Lord Sandhurst opposed the amendment, calling it “a foolish burden to impose more administrative obligations on the public sector”. He continued:

Lord Sandhurst: *Of course, our justice system should not be privatised, but the single issue here is delivery. This does not mean there are not benefits to be gained from working together with the private sector, especially as the current system is hugely overburdened. We should be welcoming prudent collaboration with private companies that specialise in supplying such services to community sentences, but only where it is right to do so because they are the right people and they pass the test of competition. We should not be needlessly blocking off an avenue that helps ease this strain. This amendment is not necessary. The Probation Service is currently in the process of regaining control of community sentences. Private community rehabilitation companies had their contracts terminated and their responsibilities transferred to the Probation Service by the last Conservative Government. Community sentence oversight and management is already in the hands of the public sector, while private and volunteer suppliers provide support services. That is how it should continue.*

Responding for the Government, Minister Lord Lemos noted that “my noble friend’s Amendment 77 is founded on concerns that unpaid work will be privatised” – but, in a campaign win for Napo, made the following commitment:

Lord Lemos: *To be completely clear, and for the avoidance of any doubt, I assure him that the privatisation of unpaid work is absolutely not being considered. The Government are clear that unpaid work must be robust and continue to pay back where it matters most: in*

our communities. The Government remain open to a full range of potential projects that help our communities. Were any of those to have any private sector involvement, it would be within the realms of the current requirement for the Probation Service to retain ultimate control and supervision. This requirement is unchanged and, as I say, we have no plans to change it. For example, it is already possible for a private company to influence the type of projects offenders may complete through nominating suitable projects, such as graffiti removal in a local community. In these scenarios, the unpaid work would always be overseen by the Probation Service and the work undertaken would always serve a community purpose—I stress that point. We do not intend to privatise the delivery of unpaid work, but we should encourage joining up with local businesses and charities to determine how best to expand projects further and to deliver work that has the greatest community benefit. We believe that there is sufficient operational guidance already in place to support delivery in a way that benefits charitable, state or not-for-profit organisations and guards against exploiting any offenders for private profit.

Woodley's [second amendment](#), first proposed by his fellow JUPG co-chair Liz Saville Roberts in the Commons, was debated on the Bill's [third day of Committee](#) later that week (3 December), alongside others on probation capacity. Lord Foster of Bath explained: "On the Probation Service, Ministers themselves have acknowledged that they have inherited a service 'under immense pressure', and the Chief Inspector of Probation has referred to 'chronic understaffing'." The Committee chair continued:

Lord Foster: *The Bill envisages more sanctioned early releases from prisons and an almost doubling of the number of people being tagged. That means more people to be supervised and therefore more work for probation officers. Currently, approximately 7,000 officers are doing this existing supervision work, and that number is considered inadequate. As one senior probation officer put it, when talking about things going wrong: "It's infuriating when some of us are being told it's our fault we're not doing enough and that we need to up our game, but actually the workload is sky high".*

I will give an example of why this really matters. Just one year ago, 73 out of every 100 released prisoners were recalled to prison. By June this year, the recall population had reached 13,538. That is the equivalent of nine prisons, costing £3.5 billion a year. Most are recalled not for new crimes but for failing to comply with their licence conditions. That is often because, frankly, they have no home or income, and they are supervised by an overworked probation officer. Preparation for release is minimal, and support afterwards is thinner still. The easy solution for these overworked probation officers, when facing licence breaches, is to get the offenders off their books and avoid any comeback if something goes wrong by taking the risk-averse route and simply sending them back to prison.

That is the situation now, but some research has indicated that, to effectively manage existing case loads and the new ones that will arise from the Bill, an extra 10,000 probation officers will be needed. The Minister will talk about how we can use new technology to help. He is absolutely right, and we fully support him, but that alone will not resolve the situation. He will also talk about the 1,000 additional probation officers already recruited and the 1,300 additional officers the Government hope to recruit. He will talk about the £700 million over four years of extra funds for the Probation Service. We do not yet know how that money is to be allocated, but it is certain that not all of it will be spent on new staff. It is my contention that combining these measures will certainly help and certainly be welcome, but they seem unlikely to meet current and new demands combined. As I said at Second Reading, I therefore fear that we will not have the means in either the Prison Service or the Probation Service to achieve the ends.

After discussing his own amendment and explaining “it seems sensible to get some measure of an acceptable case load for each of the different roles of a probation officer and then set a maximum, which would of course focus minds on the number of staff needed”, Lord Foster added: “However, I will be the first to admit that the noble Lord, Lord Woodley, and the noble Baroness, Lady Jones of Moulsecoomb, have come up with something less complicated and, frankly, more encompassing.” He continued:

Lord Foster: *Their Amendment 134 proposes that, until the Chief Inspector of Probation is satisfied that there is sufficient capacity in the service to deliver those aspects of the Bill likely to increase demand, they cannot be implemented. My noble friends Lady Hamwee and Lord Marks will no doubt speak to Amendments 153 and 154, and the noble and learned Lord, Lord Keen of Elie, and the noble Lord, Lord Sandhurst, will speak to Amendment 155, but I just point out that all three require reports, before implementation, on the practicality of different aspects of the Bill.*

Woodley highlighted how probation capacity “is crucial, bearing in mind that I raise this as a consequence of issues raised with me by the probation union Napo”, telling Peers his amendment “seeks to give the Probation Service watchdog some teeth”. He insisted:

Lord Woodley: *Officers are trained to assess risk, but they must be given the space and time to do that properly if we want to avoid reinforcing the risk-averse culture that the noble Lord, Lord Foster, mentioned. It is causing so much damage to the service – damage that we can do without.*

Noting his amendment “seeks approval from the Chief Inspector of Probation before any extra pressure is placed on the Probation Service from within the Bill”, he explained:

Lord Woodley: *This simple safeguard should address fears that the service may be unfit for purpose or otherwise, if it is unprepared for the extra work coming its way. I place on record Napo support for the other amendments in this group, on capacity, which all seek to place in the Bill perfectly reasonable safeguards such as maximum case loads for probation officers and annual reports on probation resourcing and tagging operations. I sincerely hope that the Minister can appreciate the merits in these suggestions and those in my Amendment 134, which have come directly from staff on the front line. I look forward very much to his response.*

And he called on fellow Peers to “join with me in paying tribute to the probation officer who, shamefully, was stabbed in Oxford last week while supervising an offender”, adding that this was “the second such attack recently, as an officer was stabbed in Preston in August”.

Green Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb, who co-sponsored Woodley’s amendment, explained that, “although I very much support the intentions of the Sentencing Bill, we cannot avoid at least acknowledging the strain already placed on the Probation Service.” She added:

Baroness Jones: *If we are going to put new demands on the service, we must first be confident that it can meet them. The latest report from the National Audit Office makes it painfully clear that the service is struggling with staff shortages, rising workloads and unsatisfactory outcomes. Only 79% of target staffing levels for qualified probation officers have been met, leaving around 1,500 vacancies across England and Wales. Of the 12 regions, 10 are operating beyond full capacity, and almost half of local delivery units are now rated red or amber for performance. In that context, asking His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation to confirm adequate capacity before we put pressure on it is a necessary safeguard. If we want the measures in the Bill to succeed, our Probation Service must be set up to succeed. This proposed new clause would ensure that—I thank the noble Lord,*

Lord Foster, for his kind words about it; I am a complete passenger on this—and that is why I am pleased to second it.

Lib-Dem spox Lord Marks of Henley-on-Thames agreed that “the Government have taken on board that there is a shortage of resources and a need for more resources, but it does not sit well for the Government to blame the Opposition for what they did in government and then not to increase the resources to the level that is needed.” And he agreed: “The noble Lord, Lord Woodley, and the noble Baroness, Lady Jones, may have found a simple way in Amendment 134 of delaying implementation to make the point.” Shadow Minister Lord Sandhurst also backed Woodley’s amendment, arguing that “the Probation Service already strains under unmanageable caseloads and severe staff shortages”, adding:

Lord Sandhurst: *That is why we support Amendments 134 and 137. Amendment 134 in the names of the noble Lord, Lord Woodley, and the noble Baroness, Lady Jones of Moulsecoomb, would ensure that provisions in the Bill likely to drive up demands on probation are not to be brought into force until the independent inspectorate is satisfied that the service can meet that demand. It would also empower the inspectorate to trigger a prioritisation framework for local areas. That is not disruptive; it is responsible. It recognises that probation officers cannot be asked to do more and more with less and less resource and without there being, in the end, a serious risk to public safety.*

Winding up the debate on this group of amendments, Minister Timpson insisted he was “pleased that this gives me another opportunity to pay tribute to our incredible probation staff, who work tirelessly to keep the public safe. I am proud to be their colleague”, adding:

Lord Timpson: *I begin by recognising the close interest of probation trade unions in Amendment 134, tabled by my noble friend Lord Woodley. I greatly value our ongoing engagement and meaningful consultations; their input will continue to inform our approach. I also thank my noble friend for mentioning the two horrendous attacks on our probation staff in Preston and Oxford. These are fine public servants who turn up to work to protect the public; they, and all probation staff, should not be in fear of their safety. I send both my colleagues best wishes for their recovery. We recognise HM Inspectorate of Probation as a key stakeholder and value its involvement in implementing the provisions of this Bill, but it is important to preserve its independence as an inspectorate. This amendment risks shifting the inspectorate towards a regulatory role, compromising its independent scrutiny.*

Fears over the safety of probation officers were raised again at the [next JQs](#) (16 December) after Justice Secretary David Lammy announced “we will broaden the starting point for whole-life orders to include murders connected to the current or former duties of a police, prison or probation officer. That means that offenders can expect to spend the rest of their life behind bars. That is the latest step that this Government have taken to keep our hard-working prison and probation staff safe.” Calum Miller (Lib-Dem, Bicester and Woodstock), told Lammy about his constituent, a female probation officer in the early stages of her career, who “came to my surgery last week because she is scared for her safety at work”. He explained:

Calum Miller: *Three weeks ago, her colleague in the Oxford probation office, who was following guidelines put in place following a similar attack in Preston in July, was stabbed multiple times by somebody on probation. Will the Minister meet me and my constituent to discuss extending the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, which already covers prison and custody officers, to probation officers?*

David Lammy: *The hon. Gentleman will have seen the announcement that I just made on whole-life orders. I will of course ensure that the Prisons Minister meets him. We will do everything we can to keep our probation officers safe.*

With these new whole-life orders now added to the Sentencing Bill, Minister Timpson also put his name to a [Lib-Dem amendment](#) striking Clause 35 on naming and shaming people on community sentences – another win for Napo and other campaigners. The Sentencing Act received Royal Assent on 22 January. Delivering the second [annual statement on prison capacity](#) a week later (29 January), Minister Jake Richards explained that, “in September 2024, when we were faced with the immediate risk of gridlock, we took decisive emergency action”, adding:

Jake Richards: *We changed the automatic release point for certain standard determinate sentences from 50% to 40%, to ease the intolerable pressure on the system. That was not an easy decision, but it was the responsible one. Emergency action bought us time, and, in December 2024, we set out our 10-year prison capacity strategy—the most ambitious prison-building programme since the Victorian era. We committed up to £7 billion towards the delivery of 14,000 additional prison places by 2031. Today’s statement shows that that commitment is not just rhetoric, but a reality that the Government are driving forward.*

Turning to probation, Minister Richards insisted “we cannot solve this capacity crisis if we do not support our Probation Service, which lies at the heart of these reforms”, claiming:

Jake Richards: *At least 1,300 trainee probation officers will be recruited in 2025-26. By September 2027, probation officer staffing levels are expected to have risen to around 6,500. There is no disguising the challenge ahead. There is an inevitable time lag before new officers can carry full, complex caseloads independently, but the Government are committed to rebuilding probation for the long term, and we are using innovative solutions to assist us. More than 30 digital and artificial intelligence initiatives are under way, including Justice Transcribe, which has already reduced the time spent on note-taking by around 50%, allowing officers to focus on the vital face-to-face work that turns lives around and protects the public.*

Jess Brown-Fuller noted that, while “the Minister laid out plans to increase the number of probation officers to 6,500 by 2027, the retention of officers has been a long-standing issue within the probation system, which has been compounded in recent years by the uptick in less experienced staff”. She asked:

Jess Brown-Fuller: *Will he set out what measures the Department will take to improve retention, and whether the Government will meet the HM Prison and Probation Service staffing level of 7,114 officers by the end of this Parliament?*

Richards insisted “we are having regular conversations with the relevant trade unions, and of course meeting probation officers on a regular basis is a very important part of my job and that of all Justice Ministers” adding: “That work is ongoing and we hope to be able to update the House on it shortly.”

The Justice Committee launched its [inquiry](#) into “Rehabilitation and resettlement: ending the cycle of reoffending” at the end of 2024, releasing its [report into the first part](#) of the inquiry – “rehabilitation in prisons” – in November 2025. The Government [responded](#) in January 2026, shortly after the Committee launched part two – “rehabilitation and resettlement”. At the [first evidence session](#) of this part (27 January), Warinder Juss asked about “the effectiveness of the Probation Service to provide employment support in the community”, to which David Apparicio, Chrysalis Foundation chief executive, reminded MPs that the service was still recovering from the “catastrophic” Transforming Rehabilitation part-privatisation. Policy officer at Working Chance, Alex Clarke, added that probation’s “ability to meet the demands are constrained in that it has these incredibly high caseloads, a high staff turnover and it is understaffed. All these elements work against it to better support people with convictions into employment.” Turning to effects of the

Sentencing Bill, Juss asked whether “the Probation Service and the other providers will be able to cope with the increased demand”. Clarke replied:

Alex Clarke: *We need to tackle the high staff turnover and the issues with staffing in the Probation Service. I know in 2025 HMPPS estimated, even after the recruitment efforts to increase probation officers, around 3,150 sentence management staff as a gap. We are still facing the same issues of high staff turnover and understaffing and then the implications that has on people’s motivation and ability to utilise probation as a gateway into employment.*

At the [next session](#) (24 March), Juss asked three Regional Probation Directors: “What is the average caseload of a probation officer, and what should the target be?” Linda Neimantas, director for Kent, Surrey and Sussex, said this was “quite a complex question because different amounts of work are associated with each case”, adding:

Linda Neimantas: *A caseload in Kent, Surrey and Sussex is somewhere around 30 cases for a probation officer, and probably around 45 for a Probation Service officer. But as I say, there is more work associated with a case depending on the risk.*

Greater Manchester director Chris Edwards admitted: “It is slightly higher in Manchester: about 35 for a probation officer”, but insisted: “The average can be quite misleading though. The number can be higher or lower, but it is a bit higher in Greater Manchester.” And Nicola Davies, director for Wales, revealed that her “average is 33 per probation officer, and up to 39 per Probation Service officer”, adding “there are higher numbers of cases; in particular, those with cases involving a lower risk of harm would be expected to have higher numbers than those with cases involving a high or very high risk of harm”.

Asked by Linsey Farnsworth about the Justice Transcribe pilot, Neimantas called it “one of the most successful things I have ever seen in probation; I have been in probation for 28 years and I have never seen anything go down as well with staff as Justice Transcribe”. She added:

Linda Neimantas: *The tool transcribes and summarises sessions with people on probation. The feedback I have had from staff is that it is life-changing in terms of their work because of the amount of time they save. One practitioner told me that they might see 10 offenders in a day before, and would spend half the next day writing up all the notes. Now, they say, “I’m on duty. Everything is transcribed. I go home that day. Everything is written up and done. So I’ve actually gained half a day back.”*

Davies described herself as “evangelical about the introduction of Justice Transcribe”, adding that “staff say it allows them the mental capacity to interrogate what went on during an interview, in a way they have never been able to do before. The time they have got back in terms of the recording is critical for thinking, planning and assessing.”

Farnsworth then asked about “the biggest challenges in your specific region, perhaps beyond the budget, money, and resource”, with Edwards highlighting that, “proportionally, we have a higher number of people at the start rather than later on in their careers”, adding:

Chris Edwards: *There is certainly something about becoming a fully skilled probation officer that is about time served and building on experience. We do have those challenges, and we are working through them. You cannot do anything about that, other than get on with things, and then increasingly experience will bed in.*

Davies highlighted how “we have a less experienced workforce, which can be good or bad for us in some ways. We need experience in the system, but with good learning and development

opportunities, staff can quickly pick up what is needed.” Neimantas added that, “in terms of an inexperienced workforce, 42% of probation officers in Kent, Surrey and Sussex are within their first two years. That is a real challenge for us, as is the cost of living with our close proximity to London.” Sarah Russell pushed on the impact of this rapid recruitment, asking: “Do you have enough managers within that structure to bring on these people, both the brand-new and the slightly less new? Do you have the right training to help people become effective managers?” Edwards admitted that “we have certainly stretched the elastic in terms of oversight when bringing such high numbers of trainees into the newly qualified officer space”, adding:

Chris Edwards: *We are probably at the edge of our tolerance, but it is the right thing to do to build up the numbers. There are similar experience issues with first-line management, because it is a knock-on, so we have to expedite experience at that level as well. There has always been a bit of a jump between qualifying and then what the job requires.*

And Davies insisted that “it is incumbent on us as directors under the new Sentencing Act to change the way we approach the work of the Probation Service and move from being a transactional service to being a transformational service, and put out there what we intend to be and what the purpose of the organisation is.”

The previous week (19 March), Minister Timpson had made a [written statement](#) announcing a raft of probation reforms, including to electronic monitoring. Admitting that, “for too long, the Probation Service has operated under immense pressure”, Timpson insisted: “Years of unsuccessful structural reforms, rising caseloads, outdated systems, and chronic underinvestment under the previous government left the Service overstretched and without the tools to manage risk effectively. These pressures were exacerbated by the wider Criminal Justice System challenges we inherited, including the prison capacity crisis.” His statement continued:

Lord Timpson: *A central part of strengthening the Probation Service is professionalising the workforce, building upon its legacy of over 100 years of dedicated service but equipped with skills to reduce re-offending in the 21st Century. Later this year the Government will publish a consultation on introducing external regulation for the Probation Service, to gather views on the most effective approach and legislation required. External regulation would aim to strengthen public understanding and provide formal recognition of the status of probation practitioners. This fulfils a long-standing commitment to recognise the professionalism, qualifications, knowledge and skills required for the unique role of a probation practitioner, in providing trusted advice to the courts and protecting the public. Regulation would enhance confidence in the workforce and secure parity with other recognised professions.*

The Government is also committed to ensuring that probation staff are safe at work and we are taking action to protect them. We are installing visitor lockers in all probation contact areas to reduce the risk of weapons being brought into interview spaces, and rolling out bleed control kits and defibrillators to every probation office. In addition, we will pilot enhanced safety and security measures in seven probation offices from April 2026, including the use of archway scanners, handheld wands, body-worn video cameras for unpaid work staff, and enhanced personal safety training focused on de-escalation and aggression management.

And highlighting how “persistent pressures on the Probation Service have meant that staff have not been able to deliver the levels of face-to-face supervision expected with all offenders”, he revealed: “Between 2023 and 2025, 31% of target probation appointments did not take place due to unmanageable workloads.” His statement continued:

Lord Timpson: We are therefore making a number of key changes to ensure staff time is focused where it has the greatest impact on public safety. First, we are changing the way staff assess overall offender risk, integrating the use of statistical tools to the risk assessment processes. These tools will support practitioners when making their clinical assessments by providing information on an individual's reoffending likelihood. Second, we will ensure we can deliver the face-to-face expectation with our highest-risk offenders through an overall rebalancing of staff time away from lower-risk offenders. This rebalancing will help us to set out expectations for Probation supervision which are genuinely deliverable for staff, and which will protect the public by ensuring those most at risk of serious reoffending receive the most supervision.

Back at the Justice Committee, the [second half](#) of the March session heard from Chief Inspector Martin Jones, with Farnsworth asking what a “sustainable caseload” would look like for probation officers. Jones replied that, “if you look at the Public Accounts Committee [report](#) that was recently published, it highlights a staffing gap of about 25%”, adding:

Martin Jones: I am a realist: I am a passionate believer that the Probation Service can do fantastic things, but if you overstretch it, it will systemically underachieve. On inspection, we have found that the Justice Transcribe is genuinely manna from heaven; it has the capacity to transform the service, but you need lots of that to ensure that you are freeing up probation officers to be able to do the job as well as we would want them to do. Recruitment is of course really important. We are recruiting massive numbers of probation officers, although that creates an experience problem in relation to whether there is the experience to sustain things. The other thing we need to ensure is that we shore up the service. Of course, we are recruiting more, but I think about 9% of probation officers left the service last year. How do you slow that down? There have been signs that it has slowed over the last year or so, and I think that that is because there is a very clear message that we are trying to get to a sustainable place. The challenge is probably going to be over the next 18 months, as the Government start to implement the sentencing reforms and bring in massive change. They need to manage that very carefully to ensure that we come through that period, so that at the end of this we have a Probation Service that is back to its best.

Sarah Russell brought up the recently announced extra funding, asking: “Is that sufficient?” Jones replied that “it is a reasonable starting point, but it still needs to be kept under review”, adding:

Martin Jones: The question for me as chief inspector is, how are you splitting the money within that £700 million? Clearly, a portion of that money is to be spent on employing additional staff, which is a good move. We know from the Public Accounts Committee report the level of staffing deficit in the service.

And turning to staffing levels, he explained “we are running the taps really fast to recruit people, which is great, but there is a bit of a hole at the bottom of the bucket where we are losing people, and we need to slow that or maybe find the reason why”, adding:

Martin Jones: I fear that part of the reason is that we are recruiting people, but two, three or four years down the line they are burnt out by the caseload. That is why we need to be realistic in relation to what we ask the Probation Service to do for the next couple of years, on the basis that we then enable it to grow and be in a much healthier place in five years. This overstretch means that people are placed under huge pressure; you see it, for example, in high levels of sick absence across probation units.

After Tessa Munt asked about caseloads, Jones highlighted how, “if you look at the workload management tools that are there, it would suggest that our probation officers are massively overstretched” – and he admitted “there is a link across to the fear of serious further offences”,

pointing out that, “if you are a probation officer and managing cases, there is a fear that somebody on your caseload will do something dreadful”. He continued:

Martin Jones: *If you look at the headline numbers of serious further offences, a tiny fraction of people commit a serious further offence under the supervision of the Probation Service. Risk can never be eliminated in our system in which the Probation Service is managing and holding risk in the community—*

Andy Slaughter: *Is there also an element of getting people off the books? If you have a very high caseload and people are recalled, they are somebody else’s problem for a while.*

Martin Jones: *Certainly if you are uncertain about what is going on, the easiest thing is to take the decision to recall that individual. When we do our thematic inspection, we will hopefully shine a light on what is happening beneath that. I am certain from the work we have done already that there is work that could take place to ensure that people are better supported upon release so they have a chance of succeeding. [...]*

The Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014 significantly increased the number of people being supervised on licence, so that is certainly part of it. The other thing is that if you look at the trend line, it is absolutely true that at the point at which policies were tightened up following serious further offences, the recall population significantly spiked thereafter. To some extent, the recall population is reflective of policy decisions made around tightening up recall, which has led to part of this. But I also think that the overload on probation means that, ultimately, there is perhaps more failure upon release.

And after Juss asked whether “the recall framework is too risk-averse”, Jones admitted “the current numbers look too high”, insisting:

Martin Jones: *You could manage those by better supporting officers to say, “Actually it is part of your job to manage that risk in the community.” Some of that requires some courage; it also requires the chief inspector to provide support to the frontline so that whenever there has been a mistake, you cannot simply say that you hold the probation officer accountable. It is about defensible decision making: if you recall everybody the second they put a foot wrong, you would end up with our prisons completely clogged up with recalls. Is that really what we want? We want people to succeed upon release, and that should be the focus.*

Russell admitted she was “quite concerned about something you said: after previous changes increased the workload of probation officers, recalls increased very rapidly”, adding:

Sarah Russell: *Obviously the aim of the Government’s newly changed plan is to have fewer people in prison so that those in prison can have more effective sentences and rehabilitation, but what that is actually going to do is result in a significant uplift for in Probation Service. Do you think there is a risk that as those caseloads increase, the recall numbers do the same thing again, which would be bad? Do you have any evaluation of the likely level of risk?*

Martin Jones: *It is something I am wary about, and it is important that we keep a close eye on it. Certainly, when the SDS40 changes were implemented, my big fear was that you would release people and very quickly a significant number of people would be recalled to custody. Unfortunately, I was right about that. We saw a significant spike in the recall population following the SDS40 scheme.*

Winding up the session, Slaughter warned that that “very high number” of missed probation appointments “shows a system that is not coping”, asking: “Given there are extra resources, but also very significant extra responsibilities, will the system cope going forward?” Jones replied:

Martin Jones: *The reason why I support the changes that were announced last week is that they are based on realism. On an ordinary inspection, we observe that people are meant to be seeing their probation officer frequently but they are not doing that because the Probation Service is so overstretched. Under the new system, there is a chance of meeting that, but it is about ensuring that implementation is carefully monitored and planned. The other thing that I am content with is that the implementation has been staged to ensure that it comes in phases and that there is time to prepare people. If it had all come in very quickly this spring, it would have been much more problematic. We need to keep an eye on it, and from the autumn we will be inspecting to see what the impact of some of the changes is and reporting publicly on those findings.*

The [final inquiry session](#) (16 June) heard from Minister Timpson and HMPPS executive directors Matt Grey and Jim Barton. Admitting that, for far too long there has been only one show in town – prisons”, Timpson insisted:

Lord Timpson: *If you do not fix probation, you will never fix prisons. In my view, the heavy lifting of the justice system is done in probation.*

Juss revealed that “two weeks ago, I went to Wormwood Scrubs to play chess with the prisoners at their chess club”, describing it as “a very positive experience, not only for me to try to understand the prisoners but for them having somebody coming from outside to engage in an activity with them”. He continued:

Warinder Juss: *I had a chess colleague say to me that it is better to be addicted to chess than substances. To what extent are activities of that nature something we should look at to try to improve the health and wellbeing of prisoners, not only while they are there but also to help them assimilate into society when they leave?*

Lord Timpson: *I am a big fan. Chess in Prison is a brilliant organisation. I have played chess with them upstairs over the road at one of their events. When we talk about purposeful activity, it is not just about sitting in a classroom or learning a skill; it is about having an experience and intellectual challenge with other people. I also think that reading is brilliant. Lee Child is our prison reading laureate. We have music and singing. There are so many different ideas we can bring in. Over the years, I have watched Billy Bragg perform in Liverpool Prison and lots of other things. This is where we need to be better at welcoming third-sector partners and volunteers, and not make it too difficult for them. I know so many people who would love to come in and give a talk about something or explain a hobby and get people out of their cells. Sometimes the system is too difficult with vetting and so on. I am a big fan. The Chess in Prison team does a really good job.*

Ashley Fox highlighted staff shortages, pointing out that, “in March 2026, there was a shortfall of 1,556 full-time equivalent probation officers against the target level, which would suggest that at the moment they are dealing with far too many cases. Is that a reasonable assumption to make?” Timpson replied:

Lord Timpson: *It is running too hot. We inherited a system that was broken and we are putting it all back together again. That is going to take time. We are recruiting the most new starters we can. It is limited to about 1,300 because the existing staff basically do the buddying-up training. Obviously, we want to improve retention. Retention is improving, but it still has a long way to go. Sickness is too high. We are over-recruiting at the moment from*

where we thought we would be, which is positive. We did a big recruitment campaign on TV and so on, which has really helped. We need to get to that point and we are not there yet. Chair, if you would ever like me to come and present my probation roadshow to the Committee, I will very happily do that to explain how all these bits of the jigsaw come together to get to that point in April. It is unfair on our probation staff, and the victims on whose behalf they work, to ask them to do something that is very difficult to do at the moment. By April, we should be there.

Fox pushed further, asking Timpson whether he was “confident that you will have enough staff to cope with the effects of your reforms in the Sentencing Act?” Replying: “Yes, I am confident, but I am not getting overconfident on this at all, because there are a number of moving parts,” the Minister insisted:

Lord Timpson: *Are we on track? At the moment, we are on track. I feel the team is doing an amazing job, but we need to recruit extra people. We just need to keep the stability in the system. We also have to get through September, which is the next bump in the road. After that, we should have much more clarity on the direction in which we are going.*

Sir Ashley Fox: *Are you monitoring how staff are coping with these new burdens that are being placed on them? What is the reaction from staff?*

Lord Timpson: *I will hand over to Jim on that.*

Jim Barton: *Absolutely. Lord Timpson already referenced the face-to-face contact that he is having with practitioners across the country at the moment. I run a programme called Our Future Probation Service. The task that we have been set is to reduce workload in probation by 25% by April of next year. As the Minister has referenced, we are confident that we have a plan to achieve that.*

Highlighting how the abolition of post-sentence supervision had been “really welcomed by probation staff”, Barton explained:

Jim Barton: *It is fair to say that post-sentence supervision was seen as a bit of a back end of a camel stuck on the front end of a horse. It did not really work in terms of giving them the levers they needed to work effectively with individuals on their caseload.*

And asked about the rising recall population, Timpson noted that “in 1990 there were about 100 people in prison back on recall and now we are at well over 10,000”, admitting: “Something has clearly gone wrong.” He continued:

Lord Timpson: *What has gone wrong is that there has been a lack of investment in the justice system, a lack of investment in our Probation Service, and a lack of will to address all the issues. These people have committed serious offences, but they are often the most complex people in society, and we need to be much better at finding them a home, dealing with their addiction issues, supporting them with their mental health challenges, getting them a job, and giving them that wraparound support. If we do that, it means that we are far less likely to need to recall somebody. People are recalled based on the recall test. Our probation staff do an incredible job. I take your point that we need to keep investing in our staff, but I am envisaging that with more stability and higher functioning of our Prison and Probation Service you will see fewer recalls.*

Back in February, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) had released its damning report on its [inquiry](#) into the “Efficiency and resilience of the Probation Service”. Noting that reoffending is estimated to cost the taxpayer £20.9 billion pounds a year, the report highlighted how

“performance of the service in England and Wales has worsened since the MoJ and HMPPS brought probation under full public control in 2021”, warning: “Staff shortages have been the main reason for poor performance.”

It continued: “Longstanding staff shortages have left probation staff dealing with excessive and unmanageable workloads” and “working at a level that is unsustainable for years. At March 2025, there were 5,636 full-time equivalent probation officers in post, 79% of HMPPS’s target staffing level – a shortfall of 1,479 probation officers.”

Even more shockingly, the report warned that “staff shortages have been exacerbated by HMPPS’s serious underestimation of the staff that it required. Its failure to update old data for years meant that it has only recently realised that the service has been operating with around half of the sentence management staff it needs. Even if it recruits as many staff as it plans to, HMPPS still needs to address a staff shortage of at least 3,150 staff (out of 15,000 sentence management staff needed).”

Highlighting how “the vacancy rate for probation officers has increased from 14% in September 2021 to 21% in March 2025”, the PAC added that, “in the year ending March 2025, the leaving rate for probation staff was 9.3%, up from 6.2% in 2021, and sickness rate was 13.2 working days, up from 8.9 in 2021. Poor mental ill health accounted for the largest proportion of working days lost, 41% for all HMPPS staff and 58% for probation officers.” And the report concluded: “We are not confident that MoJ and HMPPS can successfully manage the risks associated with the new probation programme.”

The PAC inquiry itself leaned heavily on the National Audit’s Office [report](#) in October on “Building an effective and resilient Probation Service” and an [evidence session](#) in December with Dr Jo Farrar (MOJ Permanent Secretary), Adam Bailey (Director of Probation and Reoffending Policy), James McEwen (HMPPS Director General CEO), Kim Thornden-Edwards (Chief Probation Officer) and Jim Barton (Executive Director of HMPPS Capacity Implementation). Highlighting the dire state of probation, deputy chair Clive Betts (Labour, Sheffield South East) insisted that “the reality is that, in the past few years, things have got worse, haven’t they? Why?”

Permanent Secretary Farrar, who took the top job at the MOJ in July 2025, admitted that, “when we brought the Probation Service back into the Ministry of Justice, we did inherit a problem. We were seeing staff shortages; the Report refers to that. There were not enough staff, and there was a high turnover of staff.” Labour’s Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) followed up on understaffing, asking: “Why was it allowed to get so bad?” He continued (edited):

Lloyd Hatton: *Given that particularly jarring conclusion in the NAO report that the Probation Service has been operating with around half of the staff required to run sentence management, how did it get to the point that it was that poor before the MOJ decided to intervene in quite a radical way?*

Jim Barton: *First of all, when we initiated that piece of work in 2022, it was not from a place of knowledge that the on-paper articulation of the resource that we needed was so out of kilter with the reality. We initiated that work because we felt uncomfortable with the fact that that data had not been refreshed in over a decade. It was a surprise to us that, when that work came through for sentence management—it is not true in the same way for other functions—the assessment of the time it took staff to complete every letter of every policy requirement in every case was so much higher than we had previously forecast.*

Lloyd Hatton: *Just to confirm, it was a surprise to the MOJ when we found out that there were half the staff required to run sentence management.*

Jim Barton: *That is not quite what I am saying. I am saying that it was a surprise to us that our detailed piece of data analysis with our staff group demonstrated that the data that we had previously been working on from 2008 was inaccurate.*

Lloyd Hatton: *That sounds like the same as what I was saying, though, which is that it was a surprise.*

Jim Barton: *I do not think that it is quite the same, because, if we, as an organisation, had been sat in a position with knowledge that our staff were under-resourced to that scale, then I deeply believe we would have taken further action earlier.*

Lloyd Hatton: *So the data and the information at the fingertips of the MOJ was so wildly inaccurate that it meant that there was a surprise factor when you, as a Department, found out that you were operating with around half the staff needed to run sentence management.*

Jim Barton: *It was not up to date when we received that information, and we have taken action.*

Lloyd Hatton: *That is quite shocking.*

Hatton continued by asking the witnesses: “If you put yourself in the position of a probation officer, you would think, ‘Why am I going to stick around in this job for a long time if those at the top do not even know how many staff are required to get the job done effectively?’” James McEwen, who was appointed HMPPS CEO in September, insisted that “what we have been doing – and we made this point earlier – is recruiting”, claiming:

James McEwen: *Our foot has been on the floor for recruitment for a number of years now. I have been talking to probation staff in London and in the midlands. It takes some time from starting on your qualification as a trainee probation officer to being a fully qualified probation officer. The flow of new probation officers is starting to make a difference, coupled with Reset and Impact. People feel like workloads are starting to become more manageable. In areas such as London, they are still far from manageable, and we are working really hard with those areas.*

And Farrar claimed “we also actively do things such as reviewing the workloads of each probation officer to make sure that they are a fair and manageable spread. We constantly look at risk, workload and staffing challenges to support, as James said, our really hard-working frontline staff.” Returning to McEwen’s comments on unmanageable workloads, PAC chair Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Conservative, North Cotswolds) noted the NAO’s warning that “HMPPS’s workload measurement tool shows that average POs were working at 118% of capacity, where 100% is the maximum capacity. Shockingly, it was even worse in London, where it was 126%.” And he asked:

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: *In relation to those poor people who are having to work those workloads, when do we expect to see those figures go back to more normal working arrangements?*

James McEwen: *All these things together, plus work that we are doing to help improve retention and reduce sickness absences, should get us into a virtuous cycle where we start to see performance improve and people come back to work from where they have had absence—a high proportion of colleagues are off with mental health absences because of the impacts of these workloads and other contextual factors—rather than the difficult places we have been in. To Members’ comments earlier, we have been in a negative cycle, with impacts of people leaving the service and all the rest of it.*

And Chief Probation Officer Kim Thornden-Edwards insisted “we have directed our training at public protection, at safeguarding and at risk management procedures, so we are homing in on those areas of our practice that we know are really important to local communities”, adding:

Kim Thornden-Edwards: *We will also look at refining our performance metrics so that we do not reduce our ambition, but concentrate our strategic focus on a core number of those public protection measures that matter most.*

The PAC report was front and centre at the [Estimates Day Debate](#) (29 June) on prison and probation budgets. Committee chair Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown kicked off the debate by highlighting the findings that “vacancy rates in the probation service have risen from 14% in 2021 to 21% in 2025”, warning:

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: *Staff are routinely working beyond capacity, estimated at 118%, although the figure is likely to be higher, particularly in London. That workload will be increased further with the Government’s early release scheme. We heard deeply concerning evidence describing a culture of emotional strain and trauma among probation staff. This is not just a workforce issue, but a public safety issue, because when probation fails, reoffending rises, placing additional burdens on the police, courts and prisons. [...] The number of recalls to prison is now at an all-time high, demonstrating a system under severe stress. Planned reforms, including early-release schemes, risk placing even greater pressure on an already overstretched probation service. Well-run probation is not optional; it is essential. It is what enables people to reintegrate into society and prevents the cycle of crime from continuing.*

Speaking next, Andy Slaughter praised “the work of the Public Accounts Committee in looking at the probation service and the report it published in February this year”, repeating the same shocking statistic:

Andy Slaughter: *The PAC report stated that the vacancy rate for probation officers increased from 14% in 2021 to 21% in 2025, with probation officers working above capacity for several years. The system has been running hot for an unsustainable period, which impacts on the hard-working probation staff. That cannot be underplayed and I hope to see improvements in this area soon.*

Then Jess Brown-Fuller highlighted how probation “has a much higher sickness rate than other civil service departments, and I think it is also largely due to stress”, adding:

Jess Brown-Fuller: *A well-functioning Probation Service is indispensable to rehabilitating ex-offenders. A dysfunctional Probation Service fails victims. Probation officers are expected to manage ever larger caseloads while receiving less training. Combined with poor pay, it is little wonder that many leave, despite wanting to help. A probation officer said to me, in one of my surgeries, that when she first started in probation 30 years ago, she spent 30 minutes with an offender she was managing. When she came out of the meeting, her boss said, “Why on earth did you only spend 30 minutes with that person? How on earth could you get to know them in just 30 minutes?” She said that if she spends 30 minutes with somebody now, she is told she needs to speed up because she has spent far too long with them and has far too many people to get through. She has stuck it out—she is still in the Probation Service—but so many people leave. We have a real retention crisis, because nobody goes into probation to tick boxes; they go in because they truly believe that they can change people’s lives.*

Responding for the Government, Minister Sarah Sackman insisted that “hard-working probation officers” who are “doing some of the most difficult jobs in our public services have been delivered a

6% headline increase in pay, and rightly so, because they do such valuable work. They have been given the tools with which to do that work.” She added:

Sarah Sackman: *We have the biggest expansion of tagging in British history, with a presumption that every offender will be tagged on release from prison, save in very specific circumstances. All of that keeps the public safe, and staff will be given the technology to enable them to do their work in a more efficient and accurate way with the Justice Transcribe AI-powered tool. These investments and reforms will ensure that probation officers can have the biggest impact by focusing on those who present the highest risk.*

Shortly before MP rose for Summer Recess, the Tories held an [Opposition Day Debate](#) (7 July) on prisoner early releases – foreshadowing the media-fuelled outrage over the imminent release of two of PC Andrew Harper’s killers that greeted Andy Burnham when he became PM less than a fortnight later. Probation capacity was raised repeatedly, with Minister Richards insisting that, “to carry out all that additional supervision, we need a Probation Service that is fighting fit”. He continued:

Jake Richards: *We are refocusing supervision to devote more time to dangerous offenders so that we can better protect the public. This is ultimately the choice: either strict licence conditions in the community for those who have already served time in prison under the changes; or, simply put, the collapse of the system altogether, leaving sex offenders and others to act with impunity.*

Speaking for the Lib-Dems, Jess Brown-Fuller highlighted how, “throughout the passage of the Sentencing Act, we were concerned about the implications for other parts of the justice system, which were already at breaking point, and their ability to absorb the additional strain”. She continued:

Jess Brown-Fuller: *The probation system, where staff are already facing ever-increasing caseloads without being appropriately resourced, has now been tasked with managing those released earlier than before, as well as those serving community sentences. Meanwhile, the prison system itself was failing to keep hold of dangerous offenders—in some cases accidentally releasing them and losing track of them altogether.*

Winding up for the Government, new Minister Catherine Atkinson reminded MPs that “Conservative-led Governments closed 295 courts and tribunals, including 162 magistrates courts – half the entire magistrates estate – and part-privatised probation in a reckless experiment that every serious review called ‘irredeemably flawed’,” adding:

Catherine Atkinson: *It cost the taxpayer hundreds of millions of pounds to unwind that and bring probation back into public hands. That is on top of the 23 prisons they closed. That is the record, and it is the Conservatives’ record, not ours. When Conservative Members ask why we have had to act, I ask them to reflect on what 14 years of neglect actually built: a prison system running at 99% capacity. At one point, it was fewer than 100 places from total collapse. Let us be honest about what that would have meant. If prisons run out of space, courts cannot sentence anyone to custody. If courts cannot sentence anyone to custody, they cannot function. If the system cannot function, police officers have nowhere to take the people they arrest. It is not hyperbole; it means the total breakdown of law and order, which is not in any victim’s interest, however serious their case.*

Atkinson finished her speech by paying “tribute to the work of our prison and probation officers, many of whom do some of the hardest jobs in public life”. But while warm words from ministers are always welcome, what probation officers need now is action to boost the workforce and reduce

workloads – and crucially to build experience by keeping people in the job for longer. Without decent pay, terms and conditions, dire retention rates will just continue to put the public at risk.

Family courts

Reform of the family courts was discussed at a [one-off session](#) by the Justice Committee (28 October), with witnesses including Cafcass chief executive Jacky Tiotto. The session was attended by PAC member Anna Dixon (Labour, Shipley), whose Committee had released a [report](#) the previous month on “Improving family court services for children”. At the session, Tiotto admitted that “the family courts are struggling”, adding:

Jacky Tiotto: *It might feel difficult to revert to covid, but we are still recovering from the slowdown that took us to something like 55,000 children in the system; we are sitting at 44,000 now. We have no less demand than we had before covid, in fact it is on the rise.*

Questioning Sir Andrew McFarlane (President of the Family Division, Judiciary of England and Wales), Sarah Russell asked: “In relation to London and the south-east, what is the cause of the ongoing delays?” McFarlane insisted “here is no single cause” but added:

Sir Andrew McFarlane: *We are under-resourced in the London and south-east courts, particularly with judges at the district judge level in the south-east doughnut around London. That is not so much a problem in London, where it is partly due to the number of court rooms available. Obviously, that limited resource is very vulnerable if the volume goes up. We have the same number of people, the same number of CAFCASS officers and social workers, but in London—I have spoken publicly about this—a culture has developed of allowing cases to drift, and in particular they have moved away from having the same judge at every hearing. It is hard to have continuity with the judge, but it pays dividends.*

In November last year, we launched a bespoke strategy for London, imaginatively called the London strategy. The aim was to deliver a rather unpalatable message to the professionals there, saying, “Look, everybody, what you’re doing is out of kilter with the way things are done elsewhere.” People have listened; the judges particularly welcomed the fact that someone had said that. The focus now is to drive numbers down, and the figures for London are beginning to move in the right direction. It is regrettable that the penny dropped only during the course of last year that the problems in London were partly a behavioural and cultural thing rather than simply due to the volume of work.

Almost six months later, five Lib-Dems MPs raised problems with family courts at [Justice Questions](#) (17 March), starting with the party’s justice spokesperson Jess Brown-Fuller, who insisted these courts “urgently need reforming so that victims, especially those of domestic violence, are not experiencing a system that is being used by perpetrators to continue to control and abuse”. She continued:

Jess Brown-Fuller: *The Domestic Abuse Commissioner reported that 73% of hearings in the family courts involved evidence of domestic abuse, but it is frequently not recognised in determinations. In the Courts and Tribunals Bill, the Government have included a clause to remove the presumption of parental responsibility, so will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to increase the scope of the Bill by including the family courts as a whole within it, and restore some faith for victims in our family court system?*

Alex Davies-Jones: *I welcome that question. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson will know of my commitment to ensuring that the family court is safe for all involved, including children and domestic abuse victims. That is why we are repealing in the Courts and*

Tribunals Bill the presumption of parental involvement in contact in these cases. Just today, the Justice Secretary has announced a national roll-out of our child-focused model, formerly known as pathfinder, over the next three years. We are doing all we can to ensure that our family courts are safe and effective for all involved.

Next, Will Forster (Woking) noted that “the Justice Secretary will no doubt be aware of the tragic case of Sara Sharif from my constituency”, explaining that “her father, who went on to murder her, was given custody of Sara by the family court, after her Polish mother was unable to give evidence because she did not have an interpreter and could not follow proceedings”, and asking:

Will Forster: *Please will the Justice Secretary agree to implement the Sara Sharif safeguarding report in full, and ensure that everyone can take part fully in family court proceedings, to protect the vulnerable going forward?*

Sarah Sackman: *I thank the hon. Member for his question and his tireless advocacy, which is a way of honouring Sara, who was brutally murdered at the hands of the very people who should have been protecting her. Of course, it is essential for justice that all court users understand what is happening in hearings. We believe that Sara Sharif’s birth mother was entitled to an interpreter, but she did not request one. However, we need to look into what should have been done to guarantee that she had an interpreter. We make over 200,000 interpreter bookings every year to ensure that people can understand proceedings, but I look forward to working with him to see what more we can do to implement that review.*

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) next explained that “my Mid Sussex constituent has waited four months for a transcript that will prove the financial terms agreed with her ex-husband in family court, which he now disputes”, adding that, “without it, she faces the expense of hiring a barrister to go back to court in April. She is facing financial hardship as a result of this.” And she asked:

Alison Bennett: *What steps is the Minister taking to address severe delays in accessing family court transcripts?*

Sarah Sackman: *I am sorry to hear about that case. These sorts of delays mount trauma on trauma for many of those going through sensitive family court proceedings. We have to get this right. Because of the sensitive nature of family proceedings, there has to be judge approval of transcripts, and they have to meet the rigorous requirements of the secure transcription unit. We cannot compromise on accuracy and quality, but we do need to get the delays down.*

Then Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) told MPs “my constituent Simon came to see me about his concerns following his family’s journey through family court arrangement proceedings. He mentioned a Both Parents Matter statistic that has stayed with me: 40% of separated fathers experience suicidal thoughts.” And she asked:

Lisa Smart: *What more can the Government do to support parents, and everybody, who goes through family court proceedings?*

Alex Davies-Jones: *I am so sorry to hear of the experience that Simon has endured. Sadly, so many others like him, fathers in particular, have similar experiences while going through the family court. That is why the Deputy Prime Minister has announced today the national roll-out of a child-focused model—formerly known as pathfinder courts—for the next three years. It will provide early risk assessments, specialist domestic abuse support for all involved, and non-adversarial problem-solving processes, and it will reduce stress and anxiety for all families, better supporting their mental health. This will not come as a*

comfort to Simon, but we hope that it will help many other fathers and families going through this process.

Finally, Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) explained “one of my constituents has been waiting since September for a three-day fact-finding hearing in the family court”, adding:

Calum Miller: *A hearing scheduled for February was cancelled at only a few days’ notice because no judge was available. My constituent had to pay nearly £2,000 in legal fees for preparation and representation, even after their barrister reduced their costs. Will the Minister reform the system so that families facing delays caused by the courts are not left bearing the financial cost of failures in the system itself?*

Sarah Sackman: *The impact of delays, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, is a feature of not just our criminal courts, but our civil and family courts. The financial impact, and, if an individual has been waiting, the build-up to the nerve-racking prospect of a trial in court, can be absolutely devastating. We are working to maximise capacity in every jurisdiction and hiring more judges to improve timeliness. I will continue to work with colleagues across the Department to deal with delays in the family court.*

The new “child-focused model” was raised again at the [King’s Speech debate](#) in the Lords (18 May), with former Tory justice minister Lord Bellamy insisting that, “when we think about the justice system, let us not forget Cinderella – the family courts”. He continued:

Lord Bellamy: *It is not entirely bad news; there is some good news on this front. Exceptionally in this debate, I congratulate, if I may, the Minister, and indeed her predecessor, the noble Lord, Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede, on the Government’s recent commitment to complete the rollout of what is now called the child-focused model in private law disputes concerning children. Previously known as the pathfinder scheme, and initiated by the previous Government, this new approach introduces a problem-solving, multi-agency approach in private family law cases concerning children in place of the traditional adversarial model. Recently described by the retiring President of the Family Division as one of the most important developments in family law over the past 30 years, this new approach has been shown to reduce backlogs, shorten proceedings, save costs, reduce stress and, most importantly, enhance the voice of the child in these often-traumatic cases.*

But there is, as always, a “but”. I appreciate that the most difficult thing in government is to extract from the machine a commitment to achieve a certain policy aim by a certain date—in other words, to set a deadline. Has anybody ever succeeded in getting the Government to set a definite deadline by which a commitment will be delivered? None the less, my plea today to the Minister—and through her to the Lord Chancellor and the Government—is to set a deadline for the completion of the rollout of the child-focused model in the family courts. Please give the children, stuck through no fault of their own for months and sometimes years on end in the family courts, the priority they so plainly deserve. This is a success story. It is a partial answer to those who believe that nothing works. Good public sector reform can be achieved, but the drive has to come from Ministers. I respectfully suggest that the end of 2027 for the complete introduction of child-focused family courts across the country, including London, would be a proper deadline. We are not yet even half way there. We have made good progress—and great credit to everyone concerned—but let us press on with this most important project.

And family courts were again debated at [Justice Questions](#) (30 June), when Lib-Dem Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) asked what steps the Government were taking to reform the family justice system. Minister Sarah Sackman told MPs “we are rolling out the successful child-focused courts nationally”, adding:

Sarah Sackman: *That means that in Northamptonshire, Coventry and Warwickshire, Northumbria, north Durham, Cleveland and south Durham, Lancashire, Cumbria, York and North Yorkshire, and Cheshire and Merseyside, you have a child-focused court coming to a court near you. We are developing a cross-system family justice strategy and legislating for new child safety measures that ensure child welfare continues to be prioritised.*

Max Wilkinson: *When family courts decide that care is to be split between parents 50:50, we might expect that fair financial arrangements follow. However, when courts make that ruling, and the Child Maintenance Service makes decisions based on which parent is the recipient of child benefit, one parent often finds they are significantly worse off than the other. Will Ministers have a word with their colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that the justice system and the CMS work more closely to achieve financial fairness for both parents in cases where courts rule for 50:50 care splits?*

Sarah Sackman: *In individual cases, how those financial settlements are made is a matter for the judiciary. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that, as in so many cases, the family court is downstream of decisions that have been made elsewhere, and it is quite right that there should be join-up between areas of Government. I am happy to take away his direction that we should liaise with DWP colleagues to ensure that child maintenance is addressed fairly.*

Labour's Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) followed up with his own question:

Josh Fenton-Glynn: *Will the Minister reassure me that we remain committed to repealing in this Parliament the presumption of contact in family courts, to bring full justice to the 67 children murdered at the hands of abusive ex-partners with whom contact should never have been granted?*

Sarah Sackman: *We are resolute and committed to repealing the presumption of parental involvement in the Children Act 1989. The campaigning efforts of the likes of Claire Throssell have been little short of heroic, and we will redouble our efforts to ensure that the repeal of that presumption comes about through the Courts and Tribunals Bill.*

Working closely with PCS and the other justice unions, the JUAPPG will continue to push for a fairer family courts service for staff and users, and will continue to monitor all legislation, including the Courts and Tribunals Bill, for opportunities to advance the interests of Napo members.

Prepared by Solidarity Consulting, October 2026