**Director General’s Trade Union Engagement Event (Friday 25th January 2022): Q&A with Amy Rees, Jim Barton, Ian Barrow**

**WORKLOAD**

* **Q.** What is being done to reduce workloads and stress levels for staff other than using trainees thus overloading them or using resources in another team creating stressors there?

As Amy fully acknowledged in the session, there are currently shortfalls in staffing. However, every effort is being made to increase resource levels as quickly as possible. Our trainee probation officers are the future of the organisation and we will protect them whilst offering the best possible learning opportunities. The Prioritising Probation work being led by Kim Thornden-Edwards is actively looking at ways we can rationalise BAU processes and remove or reduce the number of tasks faced by front-line colleagues in the interim. We will report back on this as soon as we can. We are also looking closely at the way we are implementing essential changes within the organisation and we will seek where possible to regulate the rate at which it is delivered in order to reduce pressure. However, we must remain mindful that public protection is our priority and we know that our front-line staff will continue to work hard to deliver this. We understand and are very grateful for the level of dedication they show under huge pressure.

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* **Q.** Has a workload measurement tool been formulated and agreed upon for Victim Liaison Officers? Caseloads are excessive - 250 cases are allocated to a full-time VLO. Covering absences/sickness is also expected as part of duty rota.

It is acknowledged that there aren’t sufficient victim liaison officers in the system. The 22/23 target staffing uplift for VLOs will enable us to start moving towards enhancements and or reinforce the delivery of the existing victim contact scheme. With regards to the workload management tool and the inclusion of VLOS, this remains an area for future development; however, we are unable to give you an indication of the timescale for development due to other priority work.

**DIVERSITY & EQUALITY**

* **Q.** Do you accept that probation is institutionally racist - and that vetting is an example of how not to reflect the communities we serve?

Whilst we must accept that the results of the recent race survey were not all we could have hoped for, action plans are well underway to address many of the issues raised and we take this very seriously. However, as Amy pointed out, in terms of staffing demographic overall, we are slightly ahead of the 14% national target representation for minority ethnic staff. We do accept that there are regional variations that we are working hard to improve upon. Some work is also still required to achieve this level of representation in senior management posts which currently stands at 11%. We also continue to work towards improving the vetting process with the aim that it should normally take no longer than 20 days. However, we must ask you to accept that the vetting process is prescribed and is not one over which we have sole control.

* **Q.** When can we expect staff that have come across from the CRCs have full access to the I.T. apps in the same way previous NPS staff have?

We are not aware of widespread issues with staff being unable to access apps and there is certainly no reason why this should be the case for staff on the DOM1 system.

We have spoken directly to Darren and offered suggestions for him to get what application and shared drive access he needs. He informs us that someone has already also been in touch with him about Cardinus.

Any other union members experiencing difficulties in this regard please contact the ICT Helpdesk via the Technology Portal in the first instance and they can advise. For applications which are not owned by the service such as Cardinus, please discuss with your local Business Manager who should be able to direct you on how to access

* **Q.** In 2022 is it acceptable to be adding buildings to the estate which are not accessible? e.g. no lifts

All PS Probation Offices should be designed with a diverse range of users in mind, some of whom may require increased accessibility in order to act independently, safely and with ease. Under the Equality Act 2010, we must also cater for those with accessibility requirements and ensure that all employees have equal access to facilities, services, and premises. Following the onboarding of legacy CRC sites in 2021, we continue to assess the estate and look at improving accessibility in all of our offices through local Facilities Management and wider project initiatives. We are aware of one property where it was not possible to source a suitable alternative premise or install a lift in the probation building. This is an exceptional circumstance and does not reflect our wider policy.

Over the last 2 years we’ve managed to bring huge investment to the estate with us delivering major refurbishments and new acquisitions which now meet our Design Guide principles and within that meet the accessibility requirements.

Following the Spending Review, we are finalising our strategy a further investment over the next 2 years again including major refurbs and new acquisitions to meet the following criteria:

* Assists the region in aligning their estate to the Target Operating Model
* Following the project, the property will be PS Estates Design Guide compliant (meet the accessibility requirements)
* Following the project, the property will effectively support smarter working

We’ll continue to communicate progress and evolution of the Estate and we are already looking into developing the future estates strategies for your Regions beyond the Probation Reform Programme, improving accessibility and security and support future moves to mixed caseloads.

**RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

* **Q.** Positive to hear numbers for recruitment and future forecasting. How do we keep staff in the interim? Staff that will be asked to support these new staff in their development​

Whilst acknowledging that the resource issue has been both long-standing and frustrating, we cannot overstate how much we value our staff who have stuck with it through that challenge. We are very confident that we are now turning the corner on this issue. As was said in the session, there is an unprecedented investment in growing the workforce. Although it may take some more time and effort to get us to the final outcome, we hope our colleagues whom we know genuinely care about the service will see that there is genuine progress and that the leadership are determined to deliver a fully resourced service to the highest standards.

* **Q.** What is the current retention rate at frontline delivery? Themes are clearly coming through that colleagues are leaving, especially very experienced front line staff, understand Pay is a factor, but so are many other things. ​

For 12 months to 30 September 2021, attrition for the Probation Service is 7.7%, which is an increase of 1.1 percentage points from 6.6% for 12 months to 30 June 2021. This figure is lower than the overall HMPPS leaving rate as of 30 September 2021, which is 10.1%.

Nationally, Probation Officer attrition rates are 6.9% for 12 months to September 2021, which is an increase of 1.1 percentage points from 5.8% for 12 months to June 2021.

In April 2021 we published internally the first Probation Service Recruitment and Retention Strategy (2021/2024) which outlines our commitment in 5 key objectives:

* Increasing Probation Officer numbers
* Ensuring workloads are manageable
* Recruiting a diverse workforce
* Increasing recruitment in hard to fill sites
* Attracting and retaining talented people

We are in the process of reviewing this strategy against our year one objectives (2021/2022) and updating as appropriate our year two objectives (2022/2023). To inform this work we are conducting extensive analysis and wide-ranging stakeholder engagement. Our findings and outcomes will be published in the updated Recruitment and Retention Strategy in spring 2022.

We understand the importance of retaining experienced staff in the service. As outlined in the Strategy, our focus has been on addressing recruitment and retention challenges within the Probation Service, in particular within Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) with the highest average Probation Officer vacancy rates. As part of our work, we identified several common drivers of attrition which include, pay and benefits, and lack of career progression. Work is underway to address these:

* A new standardised approach to exit interviews has been introduced. Alongside analysis of the People Survey 2021 results for Probation, this will help identify current drivers of attrition and further inform our work on retention.
* We launched three career pathways for staff approaching retirement, to help encourage them to remain in service as we recognise that they come with a wealth of experience.
* We are engaging with Trade Unions in February on retention proposals for Newly Qualified Probation Officers as part of our work around retention of staff. These proposals aim to retain PQIP’s in qualifying regions, and new recruits to regions for a period of two years.
* Communicated to staff the availability of key worker housing in some areas (discounted rent or shared equity schemes for key workers including frontline probation staff).
* A new retention toolkit is being developed and will be used by regions to address local retention issues.

**Q.** Can I ask how we balance fair and open competition with the need for experience in a role before becoming a manager? I am aware that there have been recent appointments of NQOs into SPO roles, where for example, they cannot hold a MAPPA case in their own name as an NQO, but as an SPO they will be core panel reps for MAPPA. This does not seem to make sense to me!

There is currently no minimum experience requirement before applying to become an SPO, this means that NQOs can apply through fair and open competition to an advertised position post qualification. Recruitment panels are required to vigorously test the suitability of all candidates through the application and interview process before they are appointed to the role. Including a minimum level of experience such as 2 or 3 years could amount to discrimination and a breach of recruitment principles.  It may be possible to include an alternative requirement (such as experience of dealing with high risk cases) which if implemented would require a reformulation of the SPO Job Description.

**PAY**

* **Q.** What is the point of pay negotiations if the treasury simply veto's any progress? ​

Amy Rees acknowledged the frustration that complex pay deals can cause and the delays in paying out what has been agreed. However, she was clear that Treasury do not "veto" pay progress. Rather it is a case of trying to negotiate with trades union colleagues a deal that is realistic and affordable which both sides can work with. Probation Service leaders are looking at innovative ways to structure pay awards in a way that avoids some of the difficulties, such as multi-year pay deals which mean that there is no need to refer back to the Treasury annually with the potential delays that can cause.

**SUPPORT**

* **Q.** Would it be possible for a training event for SPOs to support with the use of SOP/managing poor performance/attendance management?

As indicated by Ian Barrow during the event, he is happy to look into arranging this. This idea was also favourably regarded by NAPO and Katie Lomas referred to its previous popularity and success.

* **Q. A**re there any plans to increase the levels of support specifically available to young people transitioning over from Youth Offending Teams? Or a programme of work focusing on those between the ages of 18-24? The transition period is a key time for young people, and we face a significant drop in services who are able to assist us and the young people.

We recognise that it is vital to get the transition from youth to adult services right and that working with all Young Adults aged 18-25, gives us a great window of opportunity to reduce the risk of re-offending and harm and help people lead positive, pro-social lives. On 7th February we launch Next Steps – a resource for Youth Justice Services secondees and Probation Practitioners to support the transition process. The next steps are aligned with the principles of good transition and gives practitioners structure to adhere to the Joint National Protocol for transitions, involving partnership agencies and other important people - all key to the Young Adult's successful transition. It is available on EQuiP and can be recorded as a non-statutory intervention.  We have also just launched the Probation Service Management of Young Adults policy framework which, once implemented, will support the Probation Service in responding to the distinct needs of this age group.

**WELLBEING**

* **Q.** Sensible conversations with managers about stress and workload are well and good - but what is expected of managers to RESOLVE that problem? there is nowhere else for work to go!​

As was said earlier, we acknowledge the resourcing issues, but would once again offer reassurance that everything possible is being done through initiatives such as Prioritising Probation to see what tasks we can cut down on or even potentially halt altogether as a way of managing the situation whilst we grow and train the workforce. We expect some results from this fairly soon and we will report back as soon as we get this.

* **Q.** What central planning is involved in delivering messages, new policies, etc? It can feel at times there is a lack of appreciation of the practicality of implementing a new policy that impacts operational staff that are already over-worked and that this is not centralised in terms of timing and priorities​

All the evidence points to the fact that change was required to make the future Probation Service all it can be. The Probation Reform Programme has been working hard to design, develop and deliver the essential reforms which we believe will in due course have a very positive impact on how the service operates. However, we also acknowledge that in the current operating environment, the volume and rate of change are challenging. We are currently looking actively at the “change load” to assess whether some adjustments to how change is introduced might improve things at a front-line operations level at least in the short term.

The Probation portfolio is being developed at pace to better align and sequence change across the business as well as the change activity work in the prioritising probation initiative.

**WORKING FROM HOME**

* **Q.** There was a piece of academic research in the most recent probation journal, which looked at remote contact with the SU. The general finding was that outcomes were the same whether the SU was contacted remotely or face to face. For some of us, we have been able to work from home and contact SU's by telephone or CVP Video link ( I have done this as a report writer and generally only need one contact to conduct the interview. For me and other colleagues working from home saves over £200.00 a month and saves a two and half hour a day round trip. This improves my quality of life and time with family. It also goes some way to addressing the pay cuts linked to a decade of austerity, The current pay freeze, inflation, higher taxes /cost of living, and effective pay loss over the last ten years. Where possible will those who can and prefer to work from home be allowed to do so ​

The last two years have seen exceptional circumstances with people working from home more than they otherwise would. This period has allowed some time to evaluate our working practices. Taking everything into account we now have the smarter working policy which offers elements of both home and office working. This offers a good starting point and staff should review their own work pattern with their line manager to arrive at the best and most effective for each individual.

**PQiP**

* **Q.** Would welcome a training approach that seeks to develop existing staff not solely focused upon PQiP learners. Online refresher courses on MyLearning are limited in their effectiveness as don't meet all learning styles

We have transformed our model for learning and development to enable a comprehensive and modernised learning offer that delivers engaging content at the point of need and is accessible to all staff. The new model is evidence-based and adopts blended and flexible methods of learning and development to suit a range of different learning styles.

Managing People Convicted of Sexual Offences was developed specifically for practitioners with a minimum of two years’ experience. More recent learning products have included Prevent e-learning designed for the Probation staff and a new digital learning package on MAPPA. These are examples of us providing easy access to high-quality, practical learning resources that address existing staff concerns and support day-to-day tasks. Over the coming months, our focus turns to the rollout of the recently commissioned safeguarding and domestic abuse learning for all practitioners, in addition to commencing delivery of SEEDS 2 for Managers.

The new resources made available will support staff throughout their careers, with work underway to help ensure that all learning products form part of an overall curriculum of learning for probation staff. Learning for each role in probation is being mapped out to help to provide a more accessible CPD offer for staff, with the current learning offer being split out into mandatory, required, desirable for each role and identifying gaps in the current offer which will inform the strategic learning priorities for probation going forward. We are in the early stages of developing a CPD framework for the probation service and welcome discussion with the unions as this develops.

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