

A fork in the road: Probation unification in England and Wales two years on

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a major longitudinal research project of probation in England and Wales, arguing that the process of its ‘unification’ (re-nationalisation) continues to be a painful process whose end state remains elusive. Having previously articulated how practitioners experienced unification as ‘painful but necessary’, here, using the imagery of a journey, we argue that the speed and direction of travel have encountered a more perilous trajectory than expected as high workloads and staffing challenges have persisted. Second, we argue that enduring challenges in bedding in new working practices – and building the

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confidence of new and existing colleagues to deliver them – have acted as ‘hazards’ that have needed careful navigation. Third, we argue that staff experience a sense of individual and collective operational vulnerability, in the face of the relentless demands placed upon them. In conclusion, we identify a series of forks in the road that prompt profound questions about the delivery of probation services now and in the future.

Keywords

Probation unification, organisational change, staff experiences, recruitment and retention, public protection

Introduction

In June 2021 probation services in England and Wales were formally re-unified. The commencement of the unification programme marked a policy reversal of the dramatic part-privatization and marketisation of probation services from 2014, via the ‘Transforming Rehabilitation’ (TR) reforms (see Annison et al., 2024). In time, the then Chief Inspector of Probation would describe the privatised model as ‘irredeemably flawed’ (HMIP, 2019: 3) and further criticism would follow from a series of reports from the National Audit Office (NAO) that highlighted fundamental flaws in the contractual arrangements for the private providers and concerns around systemic underfunding (Albertson and Fox, 2019). Combined with the momentum of a Justice Select Committee enquiry into TR that was highly critical of the impact the reforms had had on the experiences of staff and victims, the government took the unprecedented decision to end CRC contracts early and, by June 2021, renationalise probation service through the creation of 12 Probation regions of England and Wales (see Millings et al., 2023 for an overview).

Our research aims to capture the experiences and consequences of the reform programme, across a three-year period, for a variety of groups within and beyond probation, and working at local, regional, and national levels.¹ In an earlier article (Millings et al., 2023) we drew on data from our case study region (one of the 12 newly formed regions in the unified service) to explore how probation managers and practitioners reflected on the decision to unify probation services and to capture how they adapted to the changed organisational arrangements during the initial phase of implementation between April 2022 and August 2022. This paper draws on our second sweep of research activity in our case study region that took place between February 2023 and August 2023 to report on staff experiences as post-unification organisational structures matured. The longitudinal nature of the research means we are able to capture the views of a mixed sample with some staff interviewed in both rounds of research ($n = 34$) in addition to the singular contributions of new voices ($n = 29$ in sweep 2).

In our first sweep of interviews, our analytical focus was drawn to capture continuity and change as experienced by probation staff in an attempt to understand how unification was being made tangible. We described the probation landscape as

being unsettled, fractured and marked by ongoing staff shortages. However, amongst most participants there remained a high level of loyalty to the probation profession if, perhaps unsurprisingly, not necessarily to the organisational structures within which it was located. While many were optimistic regarding the longer-term prospects for the unified organisation, this was also overlaid with concerns about how unification would play out in the short to medium term.

In this article, two years on from unification, we capture the views of staff during what was considered to be the 'Transformation' phase within the timeline mapped out in the target operating model (TOM).² A period that should be characterised by 'benefits realisation and efficiencies' (HMPPS, 2021: 35) the vision for the unified service written into the TOM – when published ahead of unification as a heuristic framing device to help guide the immediate future for the reformed organisation – was of a service employing operational practices that would enable the service to be more efficient, and where 'a new digital dynamic and actionable assessment tool [would] be used across the probation journey' (HMPPS, 2021: 37). Core to the successful delivery of the future operating model written into the TOM was the organisational mantra, having 'considered the foundations of a strong probation service' (HMPPS, 2021: 6), to Assess, Protect and Change.

In this article we return to our case study region to consider what moving to the next phased step of a unification process felt like, and how individuals judged what, in their experience, had changed since unification. We draw on the data from the questions we asked practitioners about their awareness of the guiding operating principles of Assess, Protect and Change, which were encapsulated within the TOM as the key purposes of probation, and of how reflective they felt these were of the probation role, and how these aims were being met in practice. What we find is that the Probation Service's journey towards a settled end state is far from complete, as the journey of organisational change has encountered unexpected delays, hazards, and at times clear forks in the road that make the process of change even more uncertain. What we find are levels of individual and collective operational vulnerability that are not only making it more challenging to deliver good probation practice, but that is unsettling the underpinning expectations regarding the trajectory of sequenced unification as envisaged within the TOM.

Methods

The Rehabilitating Probation Project is a three-year, ESRC-funded study, that explores the experiences and consequences for a range of groups within and beyond probation, of the unification of probation services. Data collection began in February 2022, having secured university ethical approval and an agreement from HMPPS to proceed. In this paper, we are focusing on data generated within our case study probation region work package. The case study division, typical of the 12 Probation Service regions in England and Wales, is geographically diverse with major and densely populated metropolitan areas, a series of smaller towns, and more rural and scarcely populated areas. Through presentations to staff teams and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality we have directly

engaged with practitioners to secure engagement in the research and we have taken steps to ensure we have representative mixes of probation delivery units (PDUs) throughout the region.

The data in this article is from a second sweep of 63 semi-structured interviews conducted by the research team between February and August 2023. Capitalising on the strength of the longitudinal design of the research project, 34 of the sample have taken part in two interviews, a year apart from one another, to help fully explore the contoured experience of organisational change. The 29 new interviewees in our second sweep have enabled us to build on the representative mix of PDUs from across the case study region to include staff involved in unpaid work and programme delivery. In light of issues raised in our first round of interviews regarding the support offered to those undertaking training on the Professional Qualification in Probation programme (PQiP) we were also keen to include some interviews from this cohort. In all we conducted 63 interviews during this period. In terms of organisational role(s), 11% were Senior Managers (SM), 23% were Senior Probation Officers (SPO), 11% were Probation Officers (PO), 22% Probation Service Officers (PSO), and 20% were employed in specialist roles. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded using NVivo.

The semi-structured interview schedules explored a series of themes related to Professional Probation Practice; Service User Experience; Identity and Belonging; External Voices; and Looking Ahead. In looking to connect the staff experiences of the process of unification and create a chronology of living through organisational change we focus specifically on participant's reflections of the official strapline Assess, Protect and Change, exploring their perceptions of its capacity to reflect the work they undertake as well as judgements respondents made about changes to practice whilst working within the post-unification setting. Using Braun and Clarke's (2013), six-phase approach to thematic analysis, four overarching themes were developed; (1) a continued sense of change trauma being experienced; (2) an enduring sense of individual and collective operational vulnerability; (3) a sense of opportunities being missed to pull through practice learning; and (4) uncertainty about the capacity of local level leaders to direct practice. We explore these themes in sequence in the paper. In the analysis that follows interview extracts have been attributed by role Senior Managers (SM); Senior Probation Officers (SPOs); Probation Officers (POs); Probation Service Officers (PSOs) and PQiP for those within our sample who are learners on the Professional Qualification in Probation programme, and pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of participants.

Further on up the (TOM) road?

The vision of the unified probation service two years on from the date of unification as articulated within the expectations of progress – mapped out by senior national probation leaders in the TOM – was of 'Transformation'. In this phase, it was envisaged that structural changes would have bedded in, and a new probation service could start to embark on benefits realisation and efficiency (HMPPS, 2021).

The powerful message coming through from the research was that the lived reality of reunification was happening at a much slower pace for participants and that the persistence of high workloads and challenges in filling vacancies meant many still felt the core elements of coherent service delivery and operating within a stable working environment were far from where they needed to be. Matt, an experienced SPO, represented the views of many when he reflected that experiencing unification was still a case of 'managing a lot of untidiness'. In a similar vein, Grace (PSO) and Paula (PO) capture the sense of the powerlessness staff felt in the face of high caseloads and a sense in which the aspirations of the TOM may have been unrealistic:

The promise that we were given that caseloads would be much lower once we'd reunified, that didn't happen. I mean, to be fair, I think probably if you're unifying two organisations, there's always going to be teething problems. (Grace, PSO)

What organisation is fully mature in two years? I think there's an unrealistic expectation put on us about where we should be now. (Paula, PO)

The prevailing assessments of participants' that service delivery was still in a state of flux was reflective of the scale of the challenges facing the nascent organisation nationally. The service was still dealing with the aftermath of the COVID pandemic and the ensuing backlog of work 'made coming out of the pandemic, if anything, even more difficult than going into it' (HMIP, 2023: 6). The challenge of rebuilding the organisation and restoring staff morale has been reflected in a series of largely negative reports from HM Probation Inspectorate (HMIP). HMIP (2023: 21) recorded that more than a quarter (27%) of staff reported that their workloads were 'not at all manageable'. The high, and increasing, proportion of cases needing to be managed in the community rather than within the prison estate, HMIP (2023) reported, was placing more demand on an already strained workforce.

The Prioritising Probation Framework (PPF)³ introduced in 2020, draws on PDU-level assessments of staffing levels and workloads to administer RAG (Red, Amber, Green) ratings for that PDU that is then used by Regional Probation Directors at a local level to focus resources on agreed priorities (at the expense of other practice activities). By way of illustrating just how much pressure the sector, nationally, was under, of the 31 PDU inspections that were undertaken during 2023 and 2024 by HMIP 10 PDUs were in amber status (where staffing levels were at 70% or less of target headcount for the PDU and workloads were over 120% of target levels) and 4 PDUs were in the more extreme red status (where staffing levels were at 60% or less of target headcount). In these PDUs, a range of measures including the suspension of national standards, reduced face-to-face contacts with low- and medium-risk cases, pausing of routine OASys reviews and reduced contact in the last 12 weeks of an order for lower-risk cases could be applied. The often clinical – and negative – assessments of the quality of working within PDUs did, uncomfortably for many, align with the challenging practice setting they felt they worked in.

In terms of help for the PDU, it's a battle. I've had neighbouring PDUs gift us some PO resource when we were particularly dire and so they came in for a period of time and managed cases. At one point, I actually wanted to go into red, which meant that we would pause all activity other than priority cases, you're very high-end cases. That was bounced back, and [after a number of months] we've only just come out of amber. I've felt that I haven't been able to do what I should be doing as a PDU head, because I'm just juggling and trying to wade through mud. That's how it has felt. (Valerie, Senior Manager)

We explored with staff their awareness of the organisational mantra Assess, Protect and Change that underpins the model of operational working laid out in the TOM. Whilst all in our sample had heard of Assess, Protect and Change not all could identify it, unprompted, as the organisation's official strapline. While most participants agreed with the principles of the strapline in shaping the work they felt probation should undertake, they felt less certain in believing that that is what is happening. During interviews, participants reported uneasily that whilst they felt they could identify with one, possibly two elements – and this was mainly to 'Protect' and/or to 'Assess' – nobody felt confident that the unified service was delivering on all three.

You are trying to connect people, or hook people, to too many different things – HMPPS business strategy, civil service values, MoJ values and, lower down, Assess, Protect and Change. People get to saturation points, so they do what feels comfortable and safe and things like the quality of our assessment, that we used to be known for and respected for amongst partnership agencies, does keep me awake at night a little bit. [Too frequently] I think the point is being missed. We are not completing an assessment because you have got a target to hit, we are completing an assessment because do you want to understand and know that person sat in front of you so that you can ensure that you are keeping people safe or working with them in the best way possible? I think sometimes that connection has gone a little bit to my mind. (Edith, Senior Manager)

Many, like Angela (PO), talked about the challenges of contending with 'process and information overload'. The TOM had plotted a path that should have helped practitioners work within an organisation that was being able to find operationally nimble ways of working by this stage of the transition. But rather than consolidate the range of expectations on staff, these had actually grown. The below views were representative of the vast majority of practitioners in our sample who felt that the capacity to work effectively with people subject to supervision was compromised by what they experienced as a much more process-driven post-unification, practice landscape:

We're expected to do too much, to have too many hats, to do the risk assessment, to do the referrals, to do the safeguarding, the meetings, to do the one-to-one appointments, to do the interventions, to do this, to do that and the other. It just feels that is too much for one person to take on. (Beverley, PO)

Day to day I could be dealing with a recall and that can take a full day so all your other targets are threatened and then the recall itself has a target and everything is so task and target heavy you don't get chance to breathe. (Anna, PSO)

Una, a legacy-CRC PSO who was now completing the PQiP training, was not alone in observing 'I don't feel like anyone is doing their job properly, they are just dealing with what happens on that day' and captured the sense of powerlessness many experienced. During interviews, participants tried to make sense of why the (now) blended caseloads felt more onerous when the actual numbers of people they supervised hadn't changed as markedly as the demand on them felt like it had. That managers and practitioners often remarked 'the workload measurement tool is not fit for purpose' (Melanie, SPO) added to the assessments that it was becoming increasingly difficult to quantify the scale of practitioner ingenuity required to sustain service delivery, and that too often complex and time-consuming tasks being undertaken to keep probation operationally viable were not always taken into account or appreciated. Consistent with the insights of development and impact of emotional labour within the sector of Phillips *et al.* (2020) we had practitioners talk candidly about the impact work was having on their well-being and personal lives:

At one point, I was on 196% according to the workload management tool. I was at breaking...I love my job, but I was literally crying, mentally, I was broken. I was working every hour. I was going home to my kids and saying, 'Quick,' and I was rushing them to bed so I could work, 'Mummy needs to work. Mummy needs to work.' The whole weekend, we couldn't do anything, because I had to work because, if it wasn't done, who's going to do it? I wouldn't meet the targets, and then I'd get in trouble. (Ella, PO)

The experiences of Alison below echo Ella's above. They help highlight the particularly acute pressures on offender managers and illustrate the perpetual tension many in the research voiced in trying to find the balance between delivering a service to support those they manage, and to avoid criticism for failing to complete necessary recording assessments. As Alison alludes to, and she was not alone in doing this, some of the highly scrutinised data recording practices she considered 'arbitrary' breeds a frustration that these activities consume so much of her (limited) time, and a contempt for the prevailing policy approach that is seen as removed from the focused work with people on probation.

I was up till 3:00am last night doing OASys because I don't have time to do it anywhere else. I'm knackered today. But if it's not done, you have the spreadsheet army on your back. You'll get spreadsheets sent after, you know, 'This hasn't been met, that hasn't been met', and some of them are really arbitrary. (Alison, PO)

For many therefore, supervising in the post-unification landscape, when it came to the aspirations to Assess, Protect and Change, the emphasis of practice (and

scrutiny) was firmly placed in the first two categories at the expense of longer-term, and what some considered the more substantial work of supporting change. Moreover, while aspirations to assess and protect were considered as core functions, many participants reflected that in the current environment these also felt difficult to achieve. With the vast majority of our sample – like Senior Manager Alice below – expressing a keenness to raise public understanding of the work of probation, there was anxiousness about this being framed principally through the narratives of public protection. Whilst there were those who felt the need to protect ran through the core of working probation practice – ‘protect should be the first strapline because it is public protection, this is why I came into the job’ (Nora, Senior Manager) – there are larger numbers of Nora’s colleagues who problematised the emphasis on ‘protect’ as it jarred with the reality of their working practice models and with what they felt was realistically deliverable. This issue was particularly highlighted by staff who reflected on what they perceived as an increasing emphasis on Serious Further Offences [SFO] Reviews and the associated impacts on practice and morale.

I’m not so sure about the ‘protect’ element. I think we have a role to play, but if you tell somebody you’re a public protection agency, I think that’s the reason we have such negativity around the SFO [Serious Further Offence] situation. We have absolutely very limited ability to prevent SFOs, just like the police haven’t got the ability to arrest people before they do something, and so we have to be wary. (Alice, SM)

It was striking across the sample how often a SFOs, or the fear of their occurrence, was mentioned spontaneously by practitioners, despite the fact that SFOs remain a relatively infrequent occurrence. A HMIP Thematic Inspection of SFO Reviews notes for instance that the incidence of SFOs on probation caseloads is well under 1%, a proportion which has remained consistent over time (HMIP, 2020). However, it was evident that for many this had become the prism through which probation had come to be viewed more widely:

Awful cases, awful reports to read, really awful and people see it externally. Friends will say, ‘Oh my God, you lot are in the papers again.’ You’re like, ‘yes but we have case-loads at 140%, 160%. They’ve already got an anxiety that they might be missing things, and then you see that. (Amy, SPO)

In our analysis, it is also one of the reasons why the emphasis on the ‘protect’ element of practice had come increasingly to the fore, with one of the knock-on effects being high levels of individual anxiety amongst practitioners as well as potentially risk-averse practice. This is reflected in Sean’s (SPO) view of what he saw as the distorting effect on overall practice:

‘the fear of the thirteen [assessed as high or very high risk of harm] is preventing the work with the eighty-seven [remainder of the caseload]’.

For practitioners therefore the stated purposes of probation as encapsulated in the phrase 'Assess, Protect and Change' were in reality skewed in practice two years into the post-unification landscape. The phase of 'transformation' which the TOM envisaged by this point had from practitioners' point of view been stymied by an overarching emphasis on risk and public protection. In a context of staffing shortfalls, and a consistent round of poor inspection reports across almost all regions, for some this stage of the journey felt more arduous and perilous than what had gone before.

Encountering (and navigating) hazards

The progress towards the delivery of the 'Transform' phase of the TOM had been curtailed by the capacity of staff to identify with, and fully operationalise the ambitions of Assess, Protect and Change, as outlined above. However, when reflecting on their working environment now and where they were twelve months previously, some respondents identified where matters had improved. Though some still identified the lingering impact of judgements made about individuals by virtue of their pre-unification legacy organisational attachments, there was a noticeable reduction in thinking in such binary terms than we'd encountered previously (Millings et al., 2023) and a much greater willingness to talk about the organisation in the region in more inclusive ways.

Within the staff group who had previously worked in CRCs we could see the most marked shift in their claims of organisational belonging and identity, where being located in the public sector was the source of a much stronger identity. McNeill and Robinson (2013) demonstrate how the conditions practitioners operate in can impact upon their authenticity and moral performance in supervision and this relates to their perceived level of professional legitimisation. CRCs' location outside the public sector had, in the view of ex-CRC staff, undermined their credibility and led to problems in securing traction with local criminal justice partners. A unified probation service speaking with one voice therefore strengthened organisational identity externally, particularly in relation to multi-agency safeguarding work:

External agencies understand and engage with us. You've got that professionalism back, we're recognised, we're part of [safeguarding] boards and things like that. Before, from a CRC perspective, that was so hard because other agencies didn't know who we were, the email address was not a government address and all sorts of things which made it really hard. So that is definitely a lot better. (Karen, PSO)

Robinson et al. (2016) help illustrate how the physical separation of the office space during the TR reform programme (started in 2014) affected staff and was often expressed within the language of *loss*, whether it be in relation to former colleagues, established relationships with those under their supervision or, at the organisational level, their identity as a locally based service within the public sector. Though issues remained about the capacity of the probation estate to accommodate staff the amalgamation of staff teams in probation buildings was viewed as positive by virtually all we spoke to. In this round of interviews, respondents reflected more on

their stronger attachments to their organisational delivery units and their relationships with colleagues. The below was characteristic of the views of the vast majority of staff that colleagues have a more shared sense of ambition and thinking than had been the case 12 months previously.

Morale feels like it has improved. I am not saying it is there, and there is still a lot further to go, but it certainly feels more connected. I think in comparison to how things felt when there was that divide, CRC, NPS. That was never going to be as effective as what we have got now, the potential to build. (Eric, PSO)

But there have also been significant challenges experiences – roadblocks – that feel like they have compromised the evolution of the unified service, particularly around bringing new staff into the organisation, and supporting the professional development of those working within the service. The Probation Service more broadly, two years post-unification, was still experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff. At the mid-point of fieldwork (June 2023) the vacancy rate for probation officers varied between 27% in Wales and 43% in London (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2023). Many of the problems facing the nascent organisation were directly attributed to the TR reforms (House of Lords, 2023). The bifurcation of caseloads under TR had meant that skills and competencies differed across staff groups, and time has been required to get all staff up to speed to work with integrated caseloads.

What happened with reunification, the CRC staff, they all had to undergo all sorts of training, because they weren't up to our standard or our requirements. I don't want to put them down but the work ethic seemed to be that they'd just phone an offender to how they were, how they were getting on. They'd work from home, meet them in the café and it's not like that in probation. You're in the office. The enforcement was awful with the CRC. (Rose, SPO)

I think the NPS has always been better at training than the CRC ever was. I remember when they came over from unification, it was like, 'Thank God, we're getting training.' It was very much that stance, [and] yes I think there are certain people who may have been recruited by the CRCs who wouldn't have passed the threshold for the NPS. I think, sometimes, that shines through a little bit. That's just in my experience. (Tom, PO)

This sense of differences in approaches and training between former CRC and NPS staff – and note the efforts Rose and Tom made to depersonalise their concerns with what they saw as systematic flaws – was still being reflected in interviews with staff two years post-unification. This speaks to both the time lags involved in achieving equivalence and the extent to which the unified Probation Service has largely taken on the practices of the NPS rather than any of the innovations and practices of the CRCs.

A range of participants also reflected that because of the aforementioned pressures there was little time to support other colleagues in their practice, in the ways in which they had been supported earlier in their careers:

I carry a shame that I can't devote more time to colleagues in the service in the way people took their time with me to help me understand this job. We all of us have our own battles to fight with what's expected and I know there's been times where I've put my head down to just get my stuff done and you can feel colleagues, especially PQiPs, sat there peering around for help, for that time set aside to talk things through, and you do it as best you can but it's happening more and more and it's sad and shameful. (Diane, PO)

As Diane identifies, the individual pressures that staff experience can impact on the capacity to be collegiate and proactive help colleagues in their decision-making. Her insight helps highlight the day-to-day challenges experienced in strengthening staffing capability. Indeed, whilst numbers remain an issue for the service, as Joe – a Senior Manager – observes '[the] problem at the moment is more about inexperience as opposed to getting the bodies'. He, like many others could see that the additional funding committed to the probation workforce programme – £155 m in the year the research took place (HMPPS, 2023) – was starting to pay dividends and in line with national trends our case study region had seen the arrival of new staff at the PSO grade and those starting on the PQiP programme. However, more prevalent was the concern around how adequately those undertaking training within the service, and especially those joining it – 'they're not being delayed in getting to the frontline, they are *the* frontline' (Dawn, Senior Manager), could be suitably nurtured to develop their craft in such a challenging climate and of how unavoidably time demanding training needs to be.

I can totally understand the positive impact at the end, [and] we've got so many new probation officers. [But] the painful period is now, where you're trying to get them to qualification, get them to a point where they've had enough experience, enough shadowing opportunities, it's difficult. They haven't got the staff to be able to support them, they haven't got the mentors, the Practice Assessment Tutors to be able to support them. So I would say that's a negative. (Valerie, SM)

The projections of the numbers of PQiP learners graduating in 6, 9 and 12-months' time helped provide staff with the sense that the cavalry was coming, but the staff – like Dawn above – were very alive to the fact that 'the cavalry' needed time, patience, and support to be at its best when it arrived. HMIP (2023: 19) recorded that one in six trainees withdrew from the PQiP programme in 2021/22 and there were many voices within the research concerned that 'staff were being set up to fail from the outset' (Amy, SPO).

This sense of a high-pressured role within an environment in which their qualified colleagues were struggling is also reflected in the perspectives of PQiP trainees that we interviewed in this phase of the research.

You look around, and there's nobody really to bounce ideas off, or to ask for advice. When you want something covered, or need support, it's often quite difficult to – you just feel like you're constantly communicating through TEAMS, or emails. (Kate, PQiP)

Consistent with their qualified colleagues' perspectives outlined earlier in this article, this sense of an overarching focus on processes over people, was also reflected in PQiP respondents', such as Dale's account below:

I enjoy parts of the job, but the offender-facing side, or the people on probation offending side, is maybe the bit that I enjoy the least and the bit where I feel the least effective at, in terms of that intervention and behaviour change kind of stuff as you just don't get the time. (Dale, PQiP)

The insights offered into the challenging working environments for new staff getting to grips with the demands of their role, and for longer in service colleagues who feel stifled in mentoring peers, are perhaps inevitable consequences of working within a sector that is still reeling from the organisational trauma of a decade of structural reform (Robinson, 2022).

A fork in the road

Two years on from the unification of probation services and with the distance travelled somewhat delayed from that originally envisaged within the TOM, and in light of the context outlined above, three key emergent challenges are evident from our interviews with staff, that could require at best a recalibration of the roadmap to follow, and at worst a more fundamental shift in direction. We think of these as representing a fork, if not a series of forks, in the road.

Firstly, it is evident that groups of staff within our sample feel that there have been opportunities lost to fully reflect upon and integrate the learning and experiences of the different constituent groups brought together through unification. In the extract below, Valerie a Senior Manager who had previously worked in a CRC reflects on a feeling that of the work of CRCs was devalued and an ensuing degree of organisational myopia:

The feeling of being bruised is that I feel that we were just stripped of all the practice that we'd [CRC] done, in terms of sentence management, being more flexible, going out to local communities, seeing people in the library, all that kind of stuff. That was completely stripped. On 26th June [there weren't any policies of ours] they were policies that were within NPS, so you adopt this policy, because this is what has been agreed. There was no recognition that the CRC had this [other] policy, and it was much better, so let's use that one. (Valerie, SM)

The majority of our sample not only struggled to identify examples of CRC working that has been transferred into the unified service but also characterised unification as an NPS 'takeover'. For some this meant that some of the innovations that CRCs had developed, such as work with service users had not been recognised or incorporated, a point reflected in Paula's extract below:

I think we've lost our focus on all of the really good work the CRCs did on engaging our people in probation. I think it took a long time for them to really build that work up from when they were a new organisation and get it to a point where they were really listening

to the voice of people on probation, and it was informing services at a senior level. [In contrast] I think we are embryonic in our progress...we have a commitment from on high around lived experience, but then we have a vetting process that weeds everybody out [it feels like] there's a bit of a disconnect with what the intention is and what the potential benefit could be for us [as a whole service] to work differently. (Paula, PO)

Second, concerns were expressed about the capacity to empower more local level decision and investment-making to support service delivery. From PDU leads and Senior Managers especially – like Steve (Senior Manager) below – came the concern that the attention to assessment and process was skewing the operationalisation of practice goals and shifting focus away from desistance-focused work that is embedded within the communities' people on probation are drawn from. That the need, in participant's view, to satisfy a matrix of measures and RAG ratings had ushered in a sense of individual and collective vulnerability that demanded attention to what staff felt were unrelenting bureaucratic demands, at the expense of committing time to the people being supervised. In ways reminiscent of Burke and Collett's (2010: 232) critique of the uncertainty and drift in focus from people that results 'from a prolonged period of unremitting change, burdened by bureaucracy and over-zealous micro-management by the centre', the effect is to focus on the means rather than the ends.

My main concern [is] that we can become good and our staff can become good at knowing what we need to do to satisfy a performance expectation in terms of timeliness, for example. So, you can undertake their initial sentence plan in 14 days, tick, and when you see your performance, it looks really, really good. Then, when someone looks at the quality, they say the quality is not there. (Steve, SM)

The feeling of 'being part of a national organisation that doesn't really understand the regional and local differences' (Carol, PDU Lead) was seen as stifling individual innovation and ingenuity. For those with experience of working within CRCs, they fondly recalled the development of non-accredited structured programmes, specialist provision for women and nurturing partnerships with local third-sector social enterprises they'd with(in). The use of community hubs to dynamically engage service users in 'a different environment' (Jasmine, SPO) in their locality helped facilitate and commission more nuanced intervention activity. Likewise, those with longer service histories and able to recall working in a Probation Trust contrast the greater autonomy they felt managers then, and the stronger regional identities that endured, with a more hindered and centralised oversight of service delivery that they felt was compelling some to consider their future(s) in the service.

There doesn't seem to be any space for local creativity and innovation. Yes, it's like, 'The computer says "no".' I think that's always going to be a weakness. I think if you start squashing people's creativity, then they'll go and find a creative place to do their creativity elsewhere. (Sean, SPO)

Built into probation unification was the role of Regional Probation Directors to help develop and deliver – in conjunction with local criminal justice partners –

regional reducing reoffending plans. This role, it was hoped (HMPPS, 2021), would help stimulate co-commissioning arrangements and help refine service delivery to meet local needs. The perception, rightly or wrongly, of the bulk of staff in our sample is that local regional probation managers and leaders feel unable to exercise autonomy, don't have the capacity to (re)commission services, and preside over too large a jurisdiction to fully appreciate what local need looks like. The sense of a need to reinvigorate the power base of local leaders to help deliver a local service was brought into even sharper focus as speculation emerged through the sweep of research of the introduction of a newer management tier – Area Executive Directors – that redrew even larger divisional areas to cover (Barton, 2022).

The third fork in the road evident in the analysis of the data from this second sweep, is the extent to which, at the level of the individual, the probation service has the capacity to create the conditions that see practitioners connect their working with wider organisational prerogatives. A recent House of Lords enquiry into community sentences concluded that 'Government and senior management seems to have lost sight of low-level offenders and to be preoccupied with the size of the prison population and post-release supervision, perhaps because of recent institutional reorganisations' (2023: 76). This sentiment was continually evident in the research where people like PSO Craig voiced their concern that 'we are treating everything at the same level and it's very much based on that management of risk, rather than enabling people to make positive changes' (Craig, PSO).

The introduction nationally, during the round of interviews, of a range of approved toolkits – designed to be delivered one-to-one by probation practitioners in the form of booklets, with accompanying videos and written exercises (HMIP, 2024a: 10) – did little to allay the worries of those concerned that probation work was becoming too standardised. There were many, like Kate (PSO), who considered that the toolkits make supervision 'too robotic' and felt that people on probation are noticing their increased use in ways that run the risk of infantilizing practitioner's engagement with those they supervise.

Diametrically opposed to those groups who saw value in the consistency of practice and capacity to support self-directed learning made tangible in the toolkits were those who believed that case management needs to retain great discretion in helping deliver change. Where, as Esme (Senior Manager) observes, 'probation is a role where you have to hold your share of risk and let people prove themselves in changing their lives'. Though the two need not be mutually exclusive, it is evident within the research that the language of toolkits is viewed by some as impinging on their professional judgement as a practitioner and echoes the kerbs on creative practice that Sean (SPO) identified earlier as contributing to people leaving the service. The perceived 'thinning' of supervisory practices, to use Dominey's (2019) framing, appears not just to impinge on people on probation's experience(s) of being supported, but also on the stimulation and satisfaction practitioners derive from their job.

In ways that revive the perpetual balance faced by probation practitioners between care and control, what we can see in the research is that practitioners, two years on from unification, are making sense of not just the meaning of official straplines, but of what delivering them means for the type of work they undertake

and probation service they choose to remain loyal to. There is a tension between on the one hand, prioritising the delivery and related monitoring of standardised working practices, or of prioritising the difficult task of creating the conditions (and assurances) practitioners feel are necessary to enable them to prioritise 'Change' and work with individuals to support their rehabilitation journeys.

Conclusion

In two sweeps of research activity in one case study area, we have captured the considerable challenges that many working within probation services in England and Wales are having to contend with on a daily basis. That the current and former Chief Inspectors of Probation have acknowledged the inter-locking and entrenched complexities faced by probation practitioners, whilst validating for many of those taking part in the research, demonstrates how widely the issues facing the coherent delivery of rehabilitation services have become.

In this article, we have examined how it feels for staff two years into the TOM unification programme timeline – designed by senior national probation leaders as a heuristic device to guide organisational and practice reform – that seeks to bolster a unified service. Whilst our problematising of where progress is on the roadmap of the TOM set out prior to unification could be seen as an inevitable outworking of a roadmap meeting reality, the fact that something so robustly planned out and paced as the TOM is experiencing delays and has been somewhat derailed by a sequence of early release schemes administered by two different governments shows how volatile and uncertain the sector has become. The announcement towards the end of this cycle of research activity of a 'probation reset'⁴ once again highlights how widely acknowledged the need to do something about unwaveringly high demands on the service requires drastic action.

What we find in our research data is that climates of uncertainty impact on the well-being and capacity of individuals to deliver good practice here. The consequences of staff shortages and an overwhelming sense of constant scrutiny, that has the scope to isolate individuals for blame, are layers of individual and collective operational vulnerability that managers and practitioners report here. Our longitudinal research is capturing how challenging it is to maintain faith in a direction of travel and to believe an end state is possible. What it also shows us is that others make their judgements about what probation is and should be, there remains real merit in engaging with the lived experiences of probation professionals whose continued loyalty to remain and deliver service, and capacity to think critically about what can and does not work in helping probation fulfil its duties to Assess, Protect and Change need to be heard before – at the fork in the road – they and their institutional memoirs leave.

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Notes

1. This research 'Rehabilitating Probation: Rebuilding culture, identify and legitimacy in a reformed public service' is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Ref ES/W001101/1).
2. The target operating model (TOM) was published by HMPPS in February 2021 and sets out the next stages of the probation reform programme in England and Wales. The TOM replaced a previous *Draft Target Operating Model* (March 2020) and it sets out the intended shape and key features of the unified service. It includes a timeline for the achievement of this vision including key stages en route.
3. The Prioritising Probation Framework (PPF) is a mechanism which attributes a RAG rating to a PDU based on staffing levels and workloads. Depending on their RAG rating, the PDU will be expected to focus its resources on agreed priorities at the expense of other business activities. The principles of the PPF were first established by HMPPS in March 2020 as a response to the operational pressures which the COVID-19 pandemic presented, including significant reductions in staffing due to illness (HMIP, 2022).
4. In a statement to Parliament on 11 March 2024, the then Justice Secretary Alex Chalk announced that 'we will reset probation' as part of a set of measures 'to refocus probation practice on the points that matter most to public protection and reducing reoffending' (Chalk, 2024). Citing the need to respond to high probation service workload priorities, prison capacity issues, and the temporary reduction in sentence served Prison Release scheme(s) a series of operational changes, introduced from 1 July 2024, then followed that sought to prioritise probation practitioner's intervention and engagement towards the first two-thirds of individual's sentences. In practice, this meant, amongst other things, that unless individuals met exemption criteria probation practitioner-led face-to-face appointments for people sentenced to under four years in custody and all Rehabilitation Activity Requirement (RAR) activities would cease in the final third of their sentence (see HMIP, 2024b).

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