



HM Inspectorate
of Probation

A thematic inspection of the recruitment, training, and retention of frontline probation practitioners

An inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation

January 2025

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Foreword

The implementation of the standard determinate sentence 40 (SDS40) scheme in July 2024 and the subsequent announcement of the Government's sentencing review have placed at centre stage the ability of the Probation Service to supervise and manage people effectively in the community. To achieve the best results, the Probation Service needs sufficient, well-trained staff to meet those demands. This thematic inspection therefore comes at a timely moment.

Since probation services unified in 2021, our inspection reports have routinely described significant shortfalls in the number of probation practitioners, resulting in excessive workloads for many, which have had a negative impact on the quality of work undertaken. Strategic plans have acknowledged the need to recruit practitioners, and this has been undertaken at pace; from the start of the 2021 financial year to the end of the 2023/2024 financial year, over 3,500 trainee probation officers have started training. While wholly commendable and necessary, recruitment at this scale places considerable demands on existing resources and has further depleted the number of practitioners, as staff have been recruited into the management and support roles required for the new recruits. Despite successful recruitment campaigns that have attracted many trainee probation officers and probation services officers, there are still shortages at the frontline, exacerbated by increased attrition rates. The staff group is also not sufficiently diverse, and further work is needed to understand why there are some disproportionate outcomes for certain groups in the recruitment processes.

While probation staff can make a huge positive difference to people's lives, the work is also demanding and, at times, stressful. Probation practitioners have often been operating with high, and in some cases excessively high, workloads, which has undoubtedly had an impact on the quality of work. The success of community supervision depends on skilled practitioners who can build rapport, assess risks, and rehabilitate people on probation. However, we have found that practitioners are not always sufficiently equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to work with the cases they are allocated. A closer look at the current training arrangements shows that considerable efforts have been made to meet the demands of high new starter numbers. However, there is still room to improve the way that training is delivered, to equip practitioners better with the skills to work effectively with people on probation.

The recruitment of trainee probation officers has now rightly moved away from seeking only to attract graduates, and a range of pathways is now available to attract a more diverse workforce. The programme is intense and not all recruits are prepared for the demands it places on them. To maximise the prospect of positive outcomes, it is essential that recruits are tested adequately, to ensure that those who are appointed have the potential and commitment to become competent probation officers. Evaluation of the recruitment and training methods used for each intake is needed to have a better understanding of what produces the most effective outcomes. There is considerable investment in training, and it is vital that this investment is focused on building a stable and committed staff group who want to remain within the Service. Considering the pace of probation training, it is crucial that the support arrangements for newly qualified officers are strengthened to allow them to hone their skills before taking on full caseloads; failing to do this can place pressures on new officers that can be overwhelming and counterproductive to long-term development and retention.

HM Prison and Probation Service recognises the reasons why many staff leave; high workloads and the ongoing pressures faced by the Service are common factors. Given the considerable demands of the work, and its impact on public protection, pay is also inevitably an issue. Pay needs to reflect the significant level of risk and responsibility that probation staff hold. Another key issue is the tension between practitioners' professional priorities and the expectations placed on them by the service. More needs to be done to harmonise these expectations and ensure that practitioners feel proud of the valuable work they do, to change lives and keep communities safe.

The sentencing review¹ that is now under way was triggered by the capacity pressures in the prison system. Increased supervision in the community will inevitably be considered and the public needs to feel confident that community supervision is safe and effective. Well-resourced, trained, and supported probation staff make this possible.

Overall, while there are initiatives aimed at improving staff experiences, challenges remain in building a capable and stable workforce. We have made recommendations based on our findings which, if followed, should lead to positive improvements in the recruitment, retention, and training of probation staff.



Martin Jones CBE

HM Chief Inspector of Probation

January 2025

¹Ministry of Justice. (2024). [Independent Sentencing Review 2024 to 2025](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/123456/Independent_Sentencing_Review_2024_to_2025.pdf) - GOV.UK

Contextual facts

The Probation Service practitioner staffing numbers – key statistics

5,436	The number of probation officer full-time-equivalent staff in post, as at 30 September 2024 ²
7,115	The target number of probation officer full-time-equivalent staff, as at 30 September 2024 ²
1,641	The number of full-time-equivalent trainee probation officers in post, as at 30 September 2024 ²
5,586	The number of probation services officers staff in post, as at 30 September 2024 (this number includes trainee probation officers) ²

Recruitment – key statistics

959	The number of probation services officers joining in the year to date, as of 30 September 2024, ² including trainee probation officers
46	The number of probation officers joining in year to date, as of 30 September 2024. ² The primary recruitment source for this grade is through recruiting trainee probation officers.

Leaver rates

430	The number of probation officers leaving the service in year to date, as of 30 September 2024, ² a rate of 7.8 per cent
771	The number of probation services officers leaving the service in year to date, as of 30 September 2024, ² a rate of 12.1 per cent

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-september-2024>

Executive summary

Context

Staffing challenges have been a consistent theme in most of our recent core adult inspection reports. When probation services unified in June 2021, the extent of practitioner shortages became apparent. In addition, the annual year-to-date resignation rate of permanent probation staff has risen for probation officers (POs) and probation services officers (PSOs) since the service was unified. Recruitment campaigns have been successful in attracting high numbers of candidates onto the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) programme; as of September 2024, there were 1,641 full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff undertaking the qualification. However, the volume of new and inexperienced staff has placed additional pressures on managers and the already depleted PO grades who are called upon to mentor and support learners. Our most recent inspection reports have found little improvement in the quality of casework, and in some respects this has deteriorated. Despite the successful recruitment drive, many probation delivery units (PDUs) are still struggling with understaffing and there are significant geographical differences in staffing levels. Recommendations for improvement have been made in a number of our inspections. The Probation Service has reviewed and redesigned aspects of its training offer; however, so far, we have not found that this has brought about improvements in the quality of work delivered.

Through this inspection, we examined the current policies, strategies, and arrangements that drive recruitment, training, and retention, to understand how effectively they are supporting the Probation Service to build a stable, capable staff group.

Methodology

We undertook six weeks of fieldwork; during the first five, we held 150 focus groups, attended by 554 staff randomly selected to participate in groups relevant to their role. Each week, we held focus groups with POs, newly qualified officers (NQOs), trainee probation officers, PSOs, senior probation officers (SPOs), practice tutor assessors (PTAs), quality development officers, regional training teams, human resources business partners, and heads of PDUs. In addition, we met regional heads of corporate services and university staff that provide the academic component of the PQiP. We observed 13 learning and development events, including training delivered by the national training team and local induction events for new starters. We held interviews with 30 people who no longer work for the Probation Service and volunteered to be interviewed in response to a request we made on social media. Each of these people had left practitioner roles since 2021. A staff survey about recruitment, training, and retention was emailed to approximately 5,700 POs, NQOs, PSOs, and PQiP trainees, and 1,204 responded.

During our final week of fieldwork, we held meetings with staff who held national responsibility for policy, strategy, and delivery of recruitment, training, and retention.

Recruitment

Staffing levels have been a consistent challenge for the Probation Service in recent years. The staffing shortfall was not immediately apparent when services unified in 2021 and it has taken time to understand the full picture. Since then, significant effort has been invested in improving staffing levels, resulting in a high number of new recruits. Revisions to the target staffing levels have increased the required number of practitioners and therefore there are still shortfalls in practitioner grades, although there are signs that the gaps are closing. For PSOs, it is difficult to understand staffing levels clearly because PQiP learners are included in their headcount. There are tensions between the understanding and expectations of workforce planning arrangements between regional and national teams. The arrangements are also hampered by outdated information technology (IT) solutions and there is no common understanding of the information that is needed by regional and national teams. Greater consultation with regional workforce planning leads is necessary to

understand these needs effectively. While the influx of new recruits has been encouraging, it is also essential to consider whether the Probation Service is attracting and selecting the right candidates. Our fieldwork found that new recruits were not always joining the service with realistic expectations about their roles. In addition, while the majority of recruits showed promising potential to develop into effective practitioners, managers had concerns that some did not possess the necessary skills or values. Concerns were also expressed about levels of resilience among new recruits who had not anticipated the demands of the roles. Changes have been made to the recruitment processes for trainee POs and a thorough evaluation is needed to investigate how these changes impact on the longer-term outcomes of each cohort, to determine which recruitment approaches lead to the highest rates of successful completions and long-term positive performance in PO roles. Additionally, insights could be gained from similar professions that require a more robust level of experience prior to joining than the Probation Service, thereby better preparing new starters for their roles. While attention is being paid to the diversity of the staff group, more work is needed to understand why success rates in the recruitment of men and people from ethnic minorities are lower than for women and white candidates.

Training

The learning and development offer within the Probation Service has many positive aspects. The volume of new recruits and changes within the practice expectations have required considerable revision and redesign of the learning offer. A balance has also had to be found between delivering sufficient training for practitioner roles, within the resources that are available. New recruits have to be trained, assessed, and managed, and all of these tasks draw increased numbers of practitioners away from frontline roles. The shortest pathway to becoming a PO takes 15 months and is available to those deemed to have sufficient experience and appropriate existing qualifications. This is a pragmatic offer in the face of such significant shortages, but it results in a pressured and demanding programme which incorporates academic study, vocational assessment, and practical training. Learners are supported by line managers, and PTAs and university staff oversee different elements of the programme. Alternative pathways have been opened up to offer longer programmes for recruits who do not meet the requirements of the shorter programme. The aim is to build a more diverse workforce. The delivery of the programme indicates a need for more coordinated working, as managers and PTAs do not have a clear understanding of the academic component and the content of practical training, which leads to learners receiving conflicted messages about what they should prioritise. Concerns persist regarding whether the 15-month duration is sufficient for learners to prepare adequately for the PO role. A strengthened support package for NQOs could help to address some of these concerns, and a newly published framework has been launched. This offers some promise in this regard but is present as guidance rather than mandatory actions, which raises concerns that NQOs will not receive the support and protection they require to progress into PO roles. Established POs feel that there is little on offer for them in terms of continuing professional development.

Overall, the training design effectively utilises technology to create efficient and flexible delivery methods. Most training offered is via eLearning or online delivery, which is a cost-effective method and is suitable for many topics, particularly those which need to convey large amounts of information or factual content. However, there is an overreliance on virtual training methods. Training to deliver the relational skills that are essential for practitioner roles, to equip them to work with challenging individuals, is not suited to be carried out online. Practitioners need to be given opportunities to practise their skills in safe environments, and too often this is not provided. A reassessment is needed to align training with research on the most effective delivery methods. There is a recognised need to enhance the training offer for PSOs, and a more structured approach is now being implemented. It is vital that both PSOs and trainee POs are given adequate opportunities to reflect on their development and learn how to apply their training in practice. At present, this embedding and reflection are not supported consistently. Managers are not sufficiently aware of the content of training, which limits their ability to understand if this has been properly understood.

There are aspirations for the Probation Service to establish a meaningful learning culture, but these have not yet been fully achieved, partly due to workload pressures. It is crucial to elevate the value and status placed on learning and development, to ensure that this is not seen merely as a checkbox process or, worse, as a burden that practitioners have little time to engage with.

Retention

The rates of practitioners exiting the Service have increased in recent years; the overall annual leaving rate for Probation Service staff, as of 30 September 2024, was 10.4 per cent; for POs this was 7.8 per cent, and for PSOs 12.1 per cent. Mechanisms are in place to gather information from those leaving who wish to express their views, but not all want to engage. Guidance is available to managers and leaders that provides approaches which can be used to address the main drivers for attrition, but these are not routinely used.

High workloads and a lack of support are critical factors in driving practitioners away from their roles. Many practitioners express frustration and feel disillusioned by the inability to dedicate adequate time to face-to-face interactions with people on probation, as the administrative parts of their role take excessive time. Many practitioners feel that the work that is expected of them is at odds with what recruitment promised, or what they aspired to deliver. Poor pay is frequently described as a frustration but is not often reported as the sole reason that staff leave; in combination with poor conditions, this becomes a more common theme. Managers frequently feel helpless, finding it difficult to offer reduced workloads or better working conditions. These findings would support efforts to seek to reduce bureaucracy and free up practitioners to spend more time working with people on probation.

Enhancing retention rates is intrinsically linked to effective recruitment. By attracting and selecting candidates with the right skills and attributes, the Probation Service can improve the workforce and create an environment where employees are more likely to stay and thrive in their roles.

Recommendations

Ministry of Justice should:

1. ensure that probation practitioners' pay and benefits adequately reflect the responsibilities of the role and are sufficiently competitive to attract and retain staff.
2. work with HMPPS to evaluate recruitment processes, to understand disproportionality of outcomes at each stage of the recruitment process
3. work with HMPPS to evaluate PQiP recruitment campaigns by cohort, to understand links between marketing and selection, and completion outcomes and longer-term retention

HM Prison and Probation Service should:

4. following consultation, provide regions with user friendly workforce planning tools which provide a consistent national approach to understanding local staffing profiles and adequately support workforce planning
5. ensure that candidates are supported to disclose all health-related needs and other information which may impact on their placements, and ensure that this information is consistently supplied to operational managers at the earliest opportunity
6. ensure that appropriate face-to-face delivery methods are used to deliver training that relates to skills development, and that candidates are given sufficient opportunities to practise these skills in learning environments
7. strengthen mechanisms to ensure that training and development is followed up, to ensure that the learning is translated into practice
8. ensure that support and protection for NQOs are consistently delivered as intended.

1. Introduction

1.1. Why this thematic?

Staffing challenges have consistently been found in most of our recent core adult inspection reports. Before the unification of services, Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) had not published their staffing figures, so the extent of practitioner shortages was unknown. The first published target staffing data following the unification of probation services in June 2021 showed a shortfall of 714 POs. Despite extensive recruitment, the latest available data still shows a worrying picture, with a shortfall of 1,702 POs, although there were 1,641 FTE trainees in post at the same time. The deficit is partly due to increased target staffing numbers, which were changed to reflect the target operating model. The target staffing for POs increased from 6,160 FTE POs in September 2022 to 7,115 FTE POs in September 2024.

Other factors that impact staffing include changes in resignation rates. The annual leaving rates of permanent POs increased from 5.1 per cent in March 2021 to 7.8 per cent in June 2024; for PSOs, the figure rose from 7.0 per cent to nearly 12.1 per cent in the same period.

Recruitment campaigns have successfully attracted many candidates to the PQiP programme; as of September 2024, there were 1,671 staff undertaking the qualification. However, attrition rates for this programme are high; in some cohorts, 20 per cent of learners withdrew from the programme, with up to 12 per cent of those exiting the service entirely. Due to the volume of new and inexperienced staff, additional management and learning and development resources have also been stretched. The need to increase the number of SPOs and PTAs has been a further drain on the already depleted PO grade.

HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) has reviewed and redesigned its training offer, including the academic and vocational components of the PQiP and the foundation training offered to PSOs. However, recent PDU inspections have not yet found any discernible improvement in the quality of casework; in some respects, this has deteriorated. Through our thematic inspections, we have also reported concerns about the quality of training, having too often found practitioners ill-equipped to manage the cases they were responsible for.

Additionally, in April 2023 the Probation Service published its interim Probation Professional Register Policy Framework to launch its long-awaited professional register, with the aim of increasing public confidence in the service and providing staff with the status and recognition they deserve. This is a positive step in reaffirming probation work as a profession; however, as with similar schemes elsewhere, the register creates expectations on POs who wish to retain this status.

This thematic inspection allowed us to explore the issues in depth and understand the connections between the recruitment, training, and retention of probation staff. We focused specifically on PSOs, POs, and those undertaking PQiP in sentence management roles. While we acknowledge that similar challenges exist in other service functions and staff grades, we chose to concentrate this inspection on these specific groups, to maximise impact while keeping the scope manageable.

1.2. Background

In a Criminal Justice Joint Inspection efficiency spotlight report, *The impact of recruitment and retention on the criminal justice system* (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2024), we reported that staff shortages across practitioner grades had negatively impacted on the delivery of a high-quality service for people on probation. The majority (69 per cent) of probation services inspected between July 2021 and August 2023 had been rated as 'Requires improvement' or 'Inadequate' against the Inspectorate's staffing standard. In addition, despite the recruitment of high numbers of trainee POs, PDUs had continued to carry high vacancy rates.

This report highlighted that police services, prisons, and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) were each facing challenges with recruitment and retention. Police services had recruited high numbers of new officers, but attrition rates were also high for those new in service. The CPS had also

recruited at volume, as well as developing in-house training schemes; however, due to the loss of more experienced staff, there had been a reduction in the overall experience of the workforce and a pressure on those who were more experienced to support newer colleagues. Achieving full staffing in prisons has been an issue not just for prison officers, but also across a range of functions, and has negatively impacted regimes.

Staff retention was also explored in this report, with increased attrition reported for police and prisons, alongside inadequate recording of reasons for leaving across several of the criminal justice system organisations.

In conclusion, this report signalled that filling vacancies did not remain the primary issue across the criminal justice system (albeit still a pressing one); however, the balance of experience and pressure to support, train, and retain newer recruits was a significant challenge. The report concluded that organisations should take care to understand the reasons why people leave, and use this information to inform initiatives to improve retention.

Other inspectorates have expressed concerns about whether Civil Service methods of recruitment are attracting and selecting the right candidates. Charlie Taylor, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, has recently expressed concerns about prison officer recruitment, stating:

*"I have concerns about some of those entering the service ... I'm hopeful that in the future there will be a greater focus on who is recruited, with prison leaders directly involved in the process, with face-to-face, values-based interviews to get the right people into the job."*³

Outside of the criminal justice services, other public services are also experiencing staffing challenges. As of 30 September 2023, there were 33,100 FTE social workers in post, an increase of 4.7 per cent from the previous year; however, there were still 7,700 FTE vacancies. In a similar way to the Probation Service, there are now a variety of pathways to qualify as a social worker, including a 14-month programme for graduates who have demonstrated six months of direct experience working with vulnerable children, young people and/or families, carers of vulnerable adults, or via an apprenticeship. These pathways are designed to attract people into the profession and increase diversity in the workforce.

Academic research

The success of the Probation Service is dependent on recruiting and retaining practitioners with effective supervision skills, or the capacity to gain such skills. Evidence from many spheres highlights that a positive working alliance between the client and the practitioner leads to better outcomes for people being supervised, and for society (Trotter cited in Durnescu, 2012; Bonta et al., 2008). Effective practice depends on the motivational and structuring skills of the practitioner, and these are skills which can be learned and maintained through continuous professional development during practitioner careers.

Effective staff recruitment and retention require a multi-faceted strategy, including competitive salary levels, attractive learning and development opportunities, realistic progression opportunities, recognition and reward for achievement and ambition, a reasonable work-life balance, constructive feedback and performance review, supportive leadership, and opportunities for employee involvement.

The Confederation of European Probation has published a set of values and beliefs⁴ which they assert are inherent in probation work. These include supporting rehabilitation and social inclusion, reducing the prison population, and offering balance between assistance and control in the supervision it provides to people on probation. Mawby and Worrall (2013) described that probation workers do not have a high public profile, and as a result the public are not well versed in what they do. They discuss the extent to which the role is 'socially tainted' (p. 83) due to it being involved with working with people who are disliked in society, in addition to being poorly or negatively portrayed in the media.

³ <https://insidetime.org/newsround/let-govs-pick-staff/>

⁴ Available at: <https://www.cep-probation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CEP-Statement-on-Probation-Values-and-Principles.pdf>

Graham et al. (2016) found that value incongruence, the gap between staff expectations versus organisational expectation, was a predictor of job dissatisfaction among social workers. Their work suggested that negative outcomes, such as job dissatisfaction and resignations, could be reduced if more were done at an organisational level to align service expectations with those of their workers.

Concerns about retention are not new; Mawby and Worrall (2013) highlighted the desire of some of their interviewees to leave probation services, including staff who were newly qualified. One factor behind this was described as follows:

'...an absence of voice at every level within the organisation was one of the most frequent complaints we heard...and one of the reasons that some felt unable to remain in the organisation' (p. 112).

Carr (2023) notes that the high level of probation staff leaving the service (13 per cent in 2022/2023) is mirrored in other public services, notably the National Health Service. Within policing, Carr notes that voluntary resignations are the highest they have ever been. However, there are factors specific to the Probation Service that Carr reports warrant attention, including the unprecedented level of change within probation work, not least the increased administrative work that practitioners are required to complete.

Research undertaken since the unification of probation services has also highlighted staff dissatisfaction with pay. Millings et al. (2023, p. 12) reported:

'In over a quarter of the interviews with frontline staff, respondents compared their pay and conditions unfavourably with other sectors (including retail), roles which they perceived as carrying far lower levels of risk and responsibility.'

Similarly, Tidmarsh, (2024, p. 482) found:

'...feelings of inadequate pay featured prominently among informants' perceptions of probation's issues with attracting and retaining staff.'

1.3. Aims and objectives

The inspection sought to answer the following questions:

- Do the policies, strategies, and arrangements for recruitment support high-quality service delivery?
- Do policies, strategies, and arrangements for learning and development equip frontline practitioners to provide high-quality services?
- Do policies, strategies, and arrangements support the retention of staff?

1.4. Report outline

Chapter	Content
2. Recruitment	This section explores the policy and strategy which drives Probation Service recruitment and workforce planning arrangements. We then consider the staffing profile of recent recruits to the trainee PO programme and the Probation Service overall. Finally, the recruitment processes are examined in detail, to consider how they are marketed, and how recruitment and onboarding are delivered.
3. Training	This section examines Probation Service training. Beginning with the overarching policy and strategy, we then report on the training and support arrangements that are in place for PSOs, trainee POs, and NQOs. Finally, we briefly consider the recently launched Probation Service professional register.
4. Retention	In this final chapter, we consider how staff retention is managed within the Probation Service, starting with the strategy, before moving on to consider why practitioners leave, drawing on findings from our interviews with former staff.

2. Recruitment

This section explores the policy and strategy which drives Probation Service recruitment and workforce planning arrangements. We then consider the staffing profile of recent recruits to the trainee PO programme and the Probation Service overall. Finally, the recruitment processes are examined in detail, to consider how they are marketed, and how recruitment and onboarding are delivered.

2.1. Policy and strategy

The *Probation Workforce Strategy 2023–2025* (HMPPS, 2023) was updated in February 2023 and notes the progress made by the probation workforce programme, including the recruitment of 2,525 trainee POs between 2020 and 2022. It recognises the importance of having a distinct strategy for the Probation Service, albeit one that sits within the overarching HMPPS business strategy. It is intended that all workforce-related strategies will be brought together in future.

The current strategy sets out five objectives, the second being 'Attracting and retaining talented people'. Against this objective, achievements are recorded as the updating of the recruitment and retention strategy, the volume of recruitment of trainee POs, a new joiner induction and buddy system, alongside peer coaching and support. Other achievements recorded include the diversification of routes into PO training and pay reforms.

The *Probation Service Recruitment and Retention Strategy (2021–2024)* (HMPPS, 2023a), first published in 2021 and updated in 2023, also sets out a number of objectives aimed at bringing the Probation Service closer to achieving its target staffing numbers, reducing workloads, creating a more diverse workforce, and improving staff retention. This document describes progress made from the original strategy, including an acknowledgement of barriers to successful recruitment, encompassing the long hiring process and insufficient communication, which it reports are being addressed through centralised recruitment processes.

Both strategies acknowledge that the probation workforce programme, which has been driving workforce development since the unification of services, will come to an end in 2025, and that the commitments set out will become part of future HMPPS core strategies and associated delivery plans, which aim to bring closer strategic join-up between prison and probation services. It is critical that, within this closer working, recruitment arrangements recognise the distinct skills required for probation work and select candidates with the right potential to allow them to carry out this work effectively. Our inspection found that changes are required to achieve this.

2.2. Workforce planning arrangements

Alongside other Civil Service departments, business support services for HMPPS are outsourced to Shared Services Connected Limited (SSCL), which includes payroll, human resources (HR), and vetting services. All staffing information is held on the single operating platform (SOP). It is widely acknowledged that this platform requires updating and does not provide the functionality that all users would like. Plans are in place to replace the system, but there are no clear timelines for when this will happen. To collate workforce planning data, PDUs are currently required to verify the data contained in the workforce planning tool, a complex spreadsheet located in the SOP that details current staffing. From this, information is supplied back to regions that is four to six weeks old. The tool also relies on each region's consistent inputting of accurate information, and this is acknowledged locally and nationally as a problem. Throughout our inspection, we heard that most areas had developed additional tools to support their local planning as they felt that the workforce planning tool did not provide a sufficiently detailed or up-to-date picture, and was unable to be interrogated in the ways they would have liked, to give an accurate picture of current staffing and support forecasting of future need. Developing these systems has taken time and resources which regional teams have said they are not sufficiently resourced for, but have had to undertake to develop sufficiently clear insight into their staffing needs. A more efficient approach would be to

have a single national system that services both the central and local needs; however, to develop this, there needs to be an agreed understanding of user needs. Central teams currently find the workforce planning tool sufficient for their needs; therefore, until the SOP platform is updated, there are no plans to alter arrangements to meet the regional needs.

An example is provided below of a regionally developed system that worked well and had been positively received by regional users. This system provided a user-friendly platform that met the needs of a range of staff involved in workforce planning.

Good practice example – ‘My PDU’, Yorkshire and the Humber region

Yorkshire and the Humber region has developed a digital workforce planning tool called ‘My PDU’. The region compiled a sophisticated dataset that included detailed information about staff in post, including health and wellbeing information and details of learning and development. Through My PDU, users can examine staffing trends (including experience and time in current role), vacancy rates, leaver and starter information, and demographics. The platform supports the region to forecast future staffing needs in better detail than national systems allow. The system is fed by information that managers update as things change, and this allows it to be much more up to date and responsive than national systems. Relevant information can be viewed at different levels – for example, by PDU, staff grade, or other variables to suit the user’s needs.

After the unification of probation services, the responsibility for workforce planning was not clearly defined. In most regions, heads of corporate services are now leading this work, with some support from human resource business partners (HRBPs). The level of involvement and the nature of the relationship with HRBPs differs significantly; some HRBPs take an active role, while others primarily provide data.

Regional leads for workforce planning described a range of problems linked to arrangements for trainee POs. Firstly, because trainee PO contracts are the same as those for PSOs, it is difficult to distinguish between them. In addition, the required management hours for trainees are calculated based on the proportion of time allocated for sentence management work, which ranges from 20 per cent to 60 per cent of their working week, depending on the programme stage they are at. However, managers felt strongly that this did not reflect the time needed to support learners. They thought that no less time was required to discuss their wellbeing, learning, and development than would be the case for a full-time staff member and, therefore, felt that management-to-staff ratios would be fairer based on headcount rather than full-time equivalence. Managers and leaders were generally confused about whether those on the PQiP programme were included in target staffing numbers or how the cases they managed impacted the workload measurement tool (WMT) statistics and PDU caseloads. Leaders and managers overall expressed a lack of confidence in the calculations of required staffing levels.

2.3. Staffing

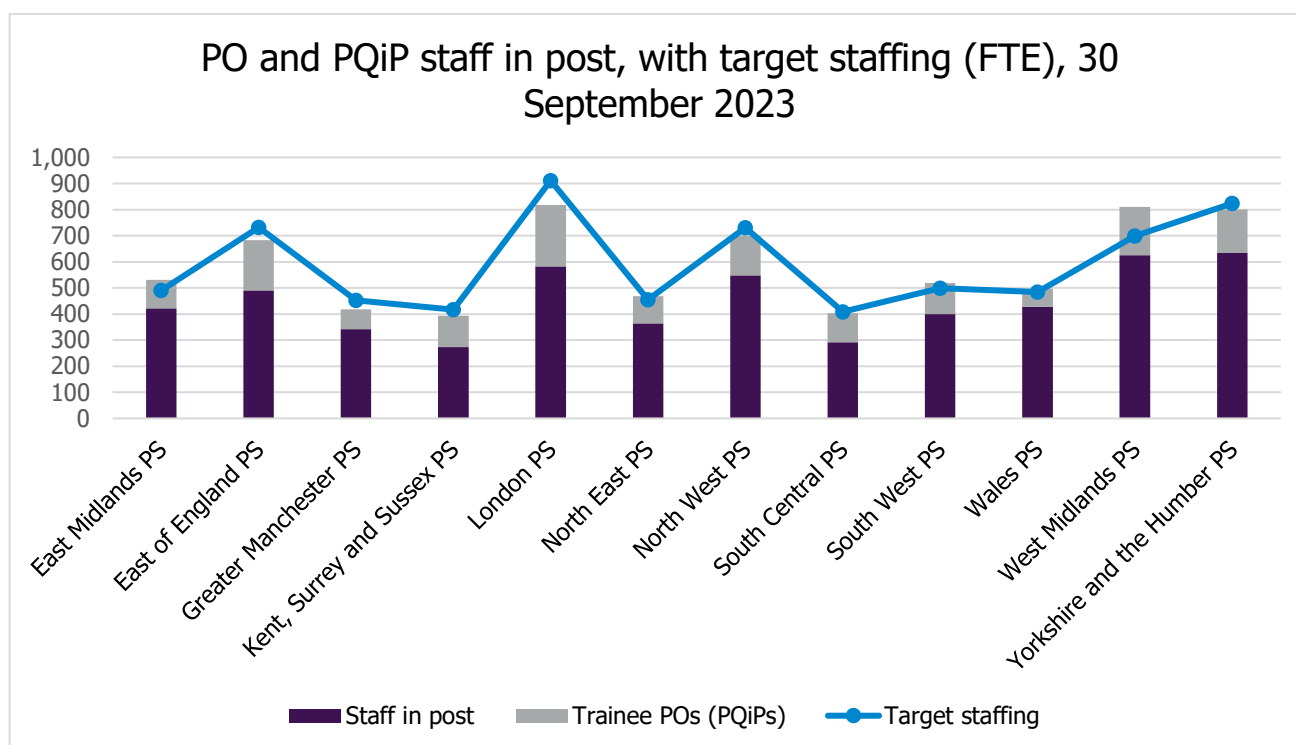


Figure 1: PO and PQiP staff in post (FTE), with target staffing (FTE), as at 30 September 2024

The most recently published staffing data for the Probation Service from September 2024⁵ shows that regions have overall PO vacancy rates that range from 11 per cent in the West Midlands to 36 per cent in London. In some regions, the number of trainee POs is close to that of vacancies, or even above it; however, in others there is still a shortfall. In part, this is due to increases in the target staffing numbers, which were recalculated this year to give a better reflection of the current work of the Service. Simply comparing PO vacancies against numbers of trainees is an oversimplification as there are other important factors to consider. The published data relates to overall vacancy rates, which include all roles that POs are placed into, including court teams, prisons, and accredited programme delivery, whereas our inspection has focused on the staffing numbers in community sentence management functions. Data supplied by the Probation Service shows that vacancy rates in nearly all regions are proportionally higher for sentence management roles than the overall figure suggests. When the data is further adjusted to take into account non-effective time (for example, workload adjustments for NQOs, long-term sickness, career breaks, and other forms of long-term absence), the picture becomes even less positive, with some areas having an even more significant shortfall in staffing; in the majority of regions, this is above 30 per cent, and in the worst cases it is far higher. In addition, as our findings described later in this report show, there are high attrition rates among trainee POs and increased numbers of POs leaving earlier in their career. In the year to 30 September 2024, 151 POs who had completed four or fewer years' service left, compared with 121 in the year to March 2023.

Understanding the overall picture of PSO staffing is complicated by the inclusion of PQiP learners within that staff group in published data, as they are employed using the same contracts. In all regions, it appears that numbers for PSO staff are about at target (as shown in Figure 2); however, when PQiP learners are removed, the picture changes (as shown in Figure 3). HMPPS's rationale for including PQiP learners within this dataset is that learners complete PSO-grade work during their effective time,⁶ and that there will always be some trainees. Our concern is that the recruitment of

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-september-2024>

⁶ This being the proportion of their time allocated to sentence management work as opposed to study time.

PQiP learners in recent years has been at a high level and may not always be so, and therefore the true staffing picture is not clear.

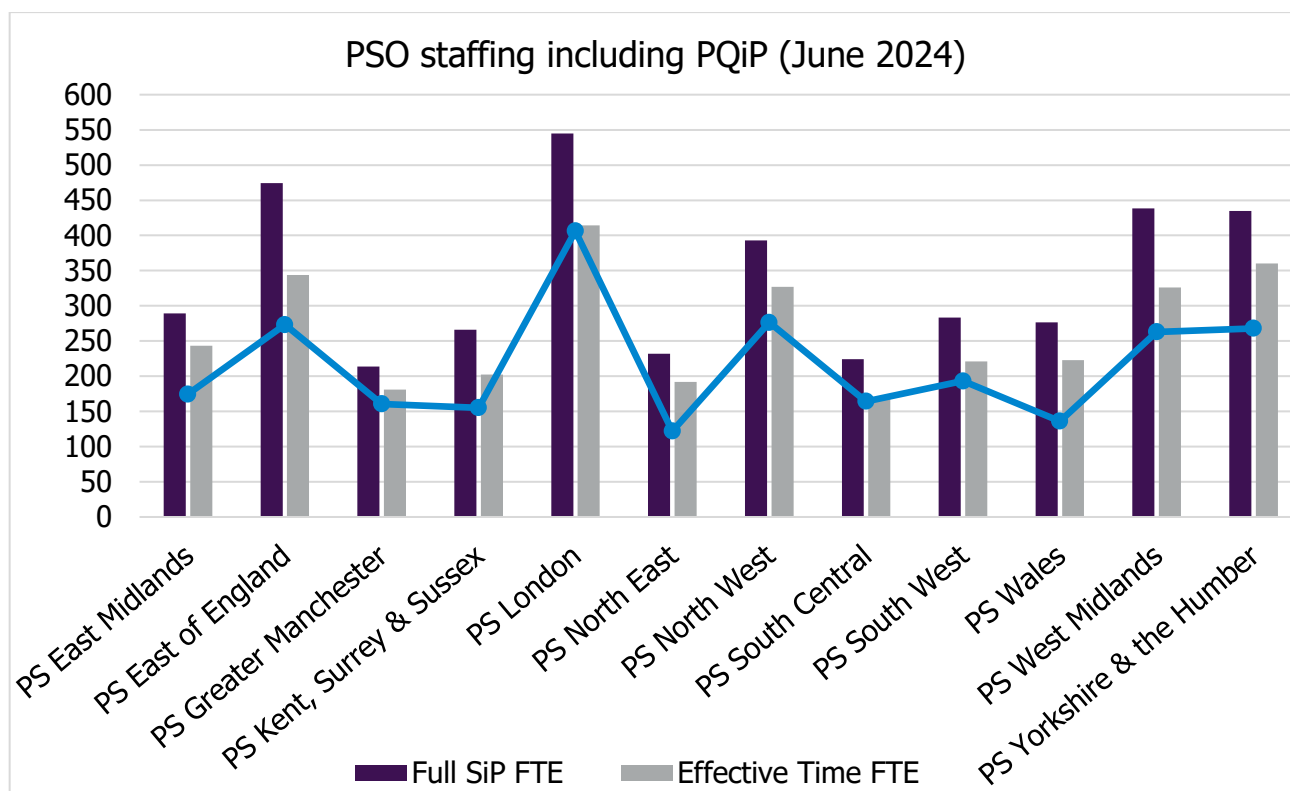


Figure 2: PSO staffing including PQiPs, as at 30 June 2024⁷

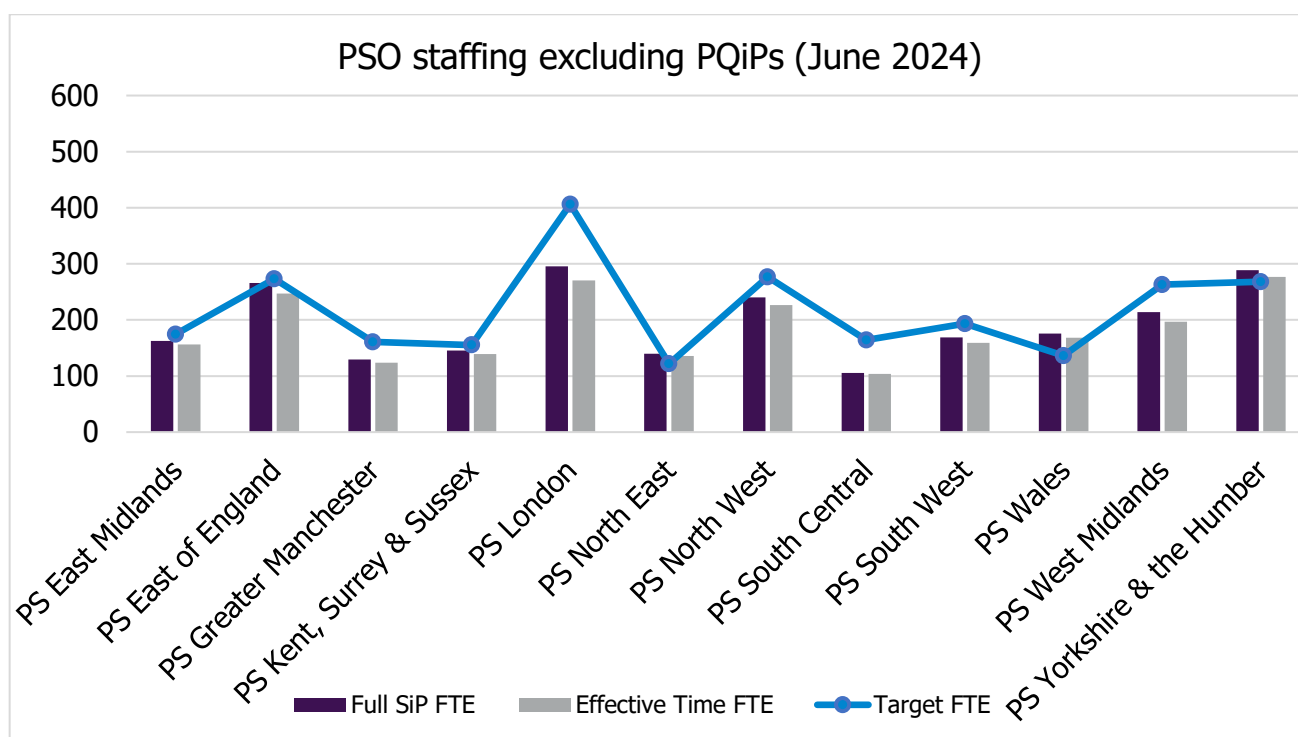


Figure 3: PSO staffing excluding PQiPs, as at 30 June 2024⁶

⁷ This data has been supplied by HMPPS and is drawn from a different source to published data and therefore will not directly tally.

Understanding the length of service that probation practitioners have is hampered by the lack of information that was obtained when staff were moved during the *Transforming Rehabilitation* arrangements, where services split into the National Probation Service (NPS) and CRCs in 2015, and then unified in 2021. The most recent published data shows that 65 per cent of POs have less than 10 years' service, and 36 per cent have completed four years or fewer.

2.4. PQiP recruitment

There have been various iterations of PO training since the recognised qualification transitioned away from social work in the mid-1990s. Until then, POs had been required to hold a Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW) or a Diploma in Social Work (DipSW). Between the transition from social work qualifications and the introduction of the new bespoke arrangements, there were several years when there was no route to becoming a PO before the new Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS) became available. This programme combined academic study with practical training in probation work through a two-year full-time course. In 2008, this programme was replaced by the probation qualifications framework (PQF), which aimed to offer a more flexible approach to qualifying, with different entry points, depending on individual experience. In 2014, PQF was replaced by PQiP, which combines academic study with vocational learning. The route to qualification depends on an individual's educational qualifications and relevant experience. For example, an existing PSO who already has a level 5 qualification would be able to qualify in 15 months, as would an external candidate who has completed relevant criminology-related academic modules if they can satisfy the criteria of having experience of working with challenging individuals. For those applying with a degree but without academic qualifications in criminology, a 21-month programme is available. A newer, non-graduate route has also recently been added, which allows individuals without a level 5 qualification to take a 27-month programme. Part-time options are also available, which extend the 15-month programme to 21 months, and the 21-month programme to 30 months. The diversification of entry pathways is a positive development and has the potential to achieve a more diverse workforce, although our fieldwork suggests that the route that recruits are filtered into needs more nuanced decision-making, to ensure that experience is being considered properly.

Advertising

Currently, PQiP recruitment runs twice a year. The campaigns are administered nationally and use a range of mediums to advertise, including on television and through social media. Some regions also supply staff to engage in local job fairs and other activity to raise awareness about probation services as a career option. During our fieldwork, surveys, and interviews, we found that some trainee POs lacked a clear understanding of the role and the process they were applying for. Some told us that they were not aware of the requirement for academic study, or that there was a vocational qualification to complete too. Other learners, often those joining as a second career, told us that they had researched the role online and joined webinars that had been useful in understanding the demands of the scheme. Some focus group attendees had concerns about the lack of monitoring of comments on social media advertisements, where they had seen negative comments made by staff or former staff about the service which they felt would deter people from applying. More common among learners who had joined from external roles was a sense that the role was not what they expected. Many told us that they felt the advertising campaigns focused on direct work with service users and did not prepare them for other tasks that were, in their experience, the greater focus of their work. The comments below are typical of what we were told.

"I thought it would be more person centred than admin centred. Job adverts pushed the working with people element but when in the role, that seems to be squeezed by everything else you have got to do."

"it's nothing like I thought it would be. From talking to more experienced colleagues, it sounds as if the job I thought I was applying for was more like what it used to be in the past – helping and supporting people. I had no idea about level of admin work. I thought would be more face to face."

An SPO who managed PQiP learners told us:

"I am not a fan of how it is advertised. I did a recruitment fair recently and the materials do not really focus on the reality and challenges of the role. They [recruits] don't really understand the risk management element and it can hit quite hard. Overall, I do not have too many concerns about the quality of candidates, more about their expectations."

The Probation Service has paid careful attention to its advertising for the PQiP programme. An evaluation relating to the advertising campaign for PQiP cohort 16 analysed the campaign, to understand which aspects of marketing encouraged its research audience to apply for roles. Of the key messages, the research audience favoured those that related to problem solving, communication, and making a difference to people's lives. Messages linked to protecting the public and reducing reoffending were not as well received. In this campaign, the messaging that was well received was used. This may tie into our findings that, for many of our survey respondents and focus group attendees, they had felt ill-informed about the role once they started. Overall, HMPPS deemed this campaign to be a success, achieving a total of 7,395 applications against a target of 3,839, with the target number exceeded for all regions. The campaign also exceeded the target of 24 per cent of applications from ethnic minority applicants, achieving 31.6 per cent. However, concerns emerging from our focus groups may indicate that, while high numbers were achieved, a proportion of those recruited are already disillusioned with the role and are unsure how long they will remain within the Service. High attrition rates from the programme or during the early years of service mean that the Probation Service is investing significant resources into training people, which is not cost effective if they leave soon after. One trainee told us in our survey:

"The job role is not explained to new staff, which is one of the main reasons that they quit shortly after starting."

During our fieldwork, we heard numerous suggestions that staff felt would allow prospective applicants to gain a better understanding of roles, including 'taster days', shadowing opportunities, or the option to contact an existing member of staff to discuss the role.

Application, assessment, and appointment

Recruitment campaigns for the PQiP programme are administered nationally. Sifting and assessment processes are delivered by SSCL. Applicants are required to complete an initial application form, which is then sifted to identify those who should be invited to an assessment centre. In the most recent campaign, an assessment of candidates' values was introduced to various parts of the process. Through work-based scenarios, candidates are asked to provide answers aimed at providing insight into whether their values align with those of the organisation. The aim of this is to get a better understanding of the likelihood of them remaining with the Service in the longer term. Assessment centres are now based online and comprise a role play, a written test, and an interview.

Section 10 of the *Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010* requires the selection of people for appointment to the Civil Service to be 'on merit on the basis of fair and open competition'. Section 11 requires the independent Civil Service Commission to produce recruitment principles,⁸ which set out how recruitment activity should be conducted. As part of the Civil Service, the Probation Service must adhere to these principles.

Many operational staff, managers, and leaders were concerned about how this framework was applied and felt that the process did not adequately test candidates' suitability for probation services work. Assessment centres used to be staffed by SPOs, PTAs, and other staff with operational knowledge, but they are now run by SSCL, and it is not clear what operational knowledge those assessing candidates have which equips them to understand fully the demands of the roles they are assessing for. Holding online assessment centres is efficient, in terms of reduced administration

⁸ [Recruitment Principles - Civil Service Commission](#)

costs and travel expenses; however, it is essential to consider the risks associated with virtual delivery. Throughout our fieldwork, we heard concerns about the effectiveness of the assessment centres. Staff at all grades questioned whether an online assessment was suitable, given that probation work involves dealing with challenging face-to-face activity, and felt that this should be replicated within the assessment centres, to observe body language and reactions properly. Some neurodivergent staff also told us that they found the online assessment centre very difficult to engage with. Despite there being a written test, we also heard concerns from managers and PTAs that some trainees have poor written skills, and they therefore questioned whether the benchmark was set high enough to ensure that candidates were able to produce the standard of work required for formal reports, such as parole or pre-sentence reports, that POs are required to complete. The most common concern was that trainees often lacked experience to equip them for the role. Compared with the requirement of six months of direct experience working with vulnerable people for the comparable 'Step Up' social work graduate programme, the benchmark for PO training seems significantly less rigorous. Examples of the views we heard are included below.

"While a degree is useful, life experience, patience, and resilience are key requirements of a probation practitioner and need to be carefully tested through the recruitment process."

"PQiP learners have very little life experience, and this is a challenge, for service users as well as learners. I have had to challenge a number of attitudes and values."

"In my interview I was thinking how on earth are they gauging how I am going to do the job. It is very structured to Civil Service and does not seem to test how someone would manage risk in the room, assess risk etc."

Those responsible for PQiP recruitment told us that, depending on the number of trainees required, the benchmark for success may vary from one campaign to the next. Sometimes, they revisited the merit lists from previous campaigns to fulfil the required numbers. There are concerns about this approach. Operational managers regularly told us that, while many of the trainees display excellent skills and have the potential to be competent POs, they also have staff who have been recruited that they doubt will be able to complete the programme or carry out the PO role effectively.

Changes have been made to the recruitment of PQiP cohort 17, which includes a values-based sift which those devising the assessment process feel will help to sift out individuals who are less likely to stay with the organisation. Feedback has been gathered from candidates and other staff about this process but, to understand the impact fully, a longer-term evaluation is needed to track the outcomes of those recruited through different mechanisms, to get a proper understanding of which approaches attract and select candidates who perform well and are retained within roles. While the assessment process tests resilience to some extent, we had concerns that it did not fully consider the emotional labour⁹ that is required in probation staff roles or assess candidates for their ability to manage this aspect of the role.

PSO to PQiP

Staff already working for the Probation Service can apply to join the PQiP programme via internal pathways or external campaigns. There are different routes for those already working as PSOs and staff in other roles. Throughout our fieldwork, we heard numerous concerns about the options for PSOs. Firstly, managers and staff told us that some currently employed highly effective existing PSOs were struggling to get beyond the application stage, in some cases despite managers having supported them to complete their applications. Little feedback was available to understand why this was the case, and it was leading to some PSOs who had applied multiple times becoming disillusioned with the process and looking for other roles outside the Probation Service. Secondly,

⁹ An Academic Insight about emotional labour can be found here: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/04/Emotional-Labour-in-Probation.pdf>

managers also described concerns that some PSOs who they felt were unsuitable, and in some cases on the verge of being made subject to formal performance measures, were getting onto the PQiP programme. Due to the Civil Service recruitment principles, there is no validation or 'sign-off' required to allow PSOs to progress onto the training scheme, and it was widely felt that this should be the case. We also heard from staff who had applied both internally and externally using the same application form, with different outcomes. This inconsistency was leading to a lack of confidence in the recruitment processes, as one trainee told us:

"I had been a PSO for many years before joining PQiP, I feel like it was a real struggle to progress, I have colleagues who could not get onto the PQiP whereas other people who worked in supermarkets were getting in."

Reasons for making the transition from PSO to PQiP varied among those we spoke to; some felt that they were already doing a similar role, as they were often co-working on high-risk cases but taking on the bulk of the work, so they felt entitled to have a higher salary. Others felt that access to the training would allow them to develop their skills and understanding of practice.

2.5. PSO recruitment

Advertising

As with trainee POs, PSOs routinely told us that they had not been clear about the expectations of the role before they started. Many thought they would have more of a supporting role, rather than having responsibility for risk assessment and report writing. Some were critical that the advertisements they had seen were for generic roles, but on appointment they had been placed into more specialist teams, such as integrated offender management or a team managing women on probation.

Newer PSOs often reported that they did not realise they would have their own caseloads; they expected their positions primarily to involve supporting POs. Those who anticipated having a caseload usually thought it would be much smaller than that which they actually encountered. Most PSOs were taken aback by the complexity of the individuals on their caseloads. They had not expected to work with people facing multiple challenges, including mental health issues, substance misuse, and homelessness. Additionally, many PSOs were disappointed to discover how little time they could spend engaging face to face with those on their caseloads because of the high levels of administrative tasks and paperwork they were required to complete. The quote below was typical of the views we heard.

"People don't know what we do, I didn't really know when I joined either. It isn't advertised well enough and that will affect applications. I knew that I would be working with offenders but didn't really understand that admin and report writing would all be part of it. I didn't understand that there would be a caseload of people coming in regularly."

"A lot of PSOs coming in don't understand the severity and risk of the cases we now hold."

Some PSOs had joined from roles where they had worked alongside probation staff; for example, recruits from partner agencies or organisations that delivered commissioned services often knew more than others about what to expect, as they were more familiar with probation work.

Application, assessment, and appointment

Recruitment for PSOs has been conducted in two ways; some regions have opted to run their own campaigns, while others have opted for support from the national resourcing teams. Usually, those that have accepted national support are those that have been identified as hard to recruit to and are generally facing the largest shortfalls. We heard mixed views on the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches. Some regions, particularly those that had been identified as hard-to-fill sites, praised the support they had received, which had taken tasks away from already stretched regional staff. Regions were grateful for the flexibility of the offer, as some were content

for the advertising to be undertaken on their behalf, but they wanted to retain control of sifting and interviewing. Some regions had initially accepted support on early campaigns but had moved away from it, as they had found that national recruitment was not responsive enough to their local needs due to a lack of understanding about the geographical layout of their area, resulting in people being recruited to the wrong locations and causing significant amounts of work to rectify. One region had introduced local assessment centres for PSOs due to concerns about the calibre of candidates and recruits that previous campaigns had achieved, particularly in relation to written work.

A new process was due to start in November 2024, where, alongside national advertising campaigns, regions would be involved in their own sifting and interview processes in partnership with the central resourcing team. It is hoped that new technology that is already being used within other government departments will also support with sifting to guard against unintentional bias.

2.6. Communication, vetting, and onboarding

A common complaint we heard from those recruited into PQiP and PSO posts was the length of time that the whole process took, from applying to starting in post. One senior leader told us:

“There are significant delays and barriers, half the time I have no idea why it is taking so long. Wrong letters. Contracts delayed. Vetting is the bane of our life. I contacted a new PSO yesterday to welcome them. I called and said I was from probation. He sounded surprised. It had been that long. That was not the first time someone has been surprised.”

Some PSOs told us that it had taken six months from the time they had accepted a role to starting in post and some went for long periods with no communication. Those joining as PQiP learners also had long waiting times. One told us:

“Initially I applied in July, it took until October to get the interview and then until March to start. There was a huge gap until I knew when I was starting. I was working full time, and it was hard to know when I should leave that role and I ended up having three months of unemployment, so I didn’t let anyone down.”

Most regions had recognised the need to try to minimise attrition in the period between offer and start date, and had put in place ‘keeping warm’ processes. This included keeping in touch and sharing information about wellbeing, staff networks, and messages from the regional probation director with those waiting to start, aimed at fostering a sense of belonging. Those involved in recruitment are awaiting the launch of an improved system that they hope will provide more accessible information about where candidates are in the process, which will allow them to address delays and keep candidates better informed.

Pre-employment checks

During the period between the job offer being made and a start date being offered, pre-employment checks are completed to ensure that candidates are fit and suitable for the role. We heard concerns throughout our fieldwork that this process took an unacceptably long time and built in delays which in some cases led to candidates dropping out of the process. One PSO told us that it had taken seven months to complete the process.

The administration of pre-employment checks is delivered by SSCL. All HMPPS staff are required to have enhanced level 2 checks. As part of the process, there are a number of stages, including checks on identity documentation, the right to work in the UK, criminal conviction history, address and previous employment, as well as a pre-employment health assessment. The extent of these checks can depend, in part, on the information supplied and the personal circumstances of the candidate. SSCL told us that candidates can cause delays by not supplying the correct information. When issues of concern arise, these are referred to the relevant Ministry of Justice team to make decisions about whether or not candidates should progress. SSCL has a target of 25 days to complete these checks and is confident that it achieves, or exceeds, this target; for example, in

September 2024 it achieved a 15-working-day average. It says that the delays are due to missing information, which puts a temporary stop on the process. It is hopeful that the new recruitment and onboarding platform will reduce delays, as it will alert candidates more effectively to missing information.

Those joining as trainee POs also need to pass an additional vetting process before they can access the ViSOR¹⁰ platform, a required part of work as a PO. The additional vetting required is non-police personnel vetting, which is conducted by Warwickshire Police for all probation regions.

Those joining the PQiP programme had additional complications, and some reported not knowing which pathway they had been assigned to, or which office they were to be based at. One learner told us:

"I found it annoying not knowing if I was on the 15- or 21-month programme until the last minute. It was hard not being guaranteed a certain office or a job – people have got lives to plan around."

Managers told us that they did not receive information about PQiP starters early enough. We were given examples of new starters with physical disabilities who had been placed in offices that were not suited to their needs, and others who had family connections to people on probation who reported to the office they had been allocated to. Most managers were positive that these challenges could be overcome, given sufficient time to make alternative arrangements, but they felt that the current timescales, which can be only two weeks before start dates, did not allow for this. New starters also found this a problem. One told us:

"I was offered [an office] which wasn't one of the three places I had indicated as a preference. I declined as it was over an hour's commute. Later I was offered one of my preferences. I had no time to think about it as I had already had to give a month's notice on my previous job."

2.7. PO returners

The Probation Service now offers a returners scheme, where qualified POs who have left the Civil Service within the last five years can return without having to apply through fair and open competition, meaning that no application form or interview process is needed. The website for the scheme suggests that returners could be placed into a role within two weeks of completing vetting and describes that:

'Starting salary, within the relevant pay scale, can be considered on a case-by-case basis in accordance with existing process to start candidates higher than the minimum if individual circumstances support it.'

The discretion that can be applied to salary is limited to a 10 per cent increase, which may not be a meaningful incentive for an individual who was at the top of their pay scale before they left. We spoke to one PO who had 17 years' experience but was required to start near the bottom of the pay scale when they returned, and was already looking for alternative work again as they felt their experience was not being adequately remunerated. Some regions reported that they are starting to have people apply to return through the scheme but have experienced some concerns with being able to gain information on why people have left, in order to make informed decisions about whether they should be rehired. Examples were provided of people who had returned through the scheme, with problems with their performance emerging soon after, which were later found to have been an issue in their previous employment. During the year to 30 September 2024, 46 POs had rejoined the service.

¹⁰ ViSOR is the national violent and sexual offender register used by police, prisons, and probation services.

2.8. Diversity of staff

Gender

As part of our core inspection standards, we consider whether the workforce in each PDU reflects adequately the diversity of the local population. In terms of gender, nationally the Probation Service workforce is disproportionately female, varying between 75 and 79 per cent since 2016. The proportion of males who apply to the Probation Service is greater than for those who are eventually selected, as Figure 4 shows, and more needs to be understood about why men disproportionately fall out of the process.

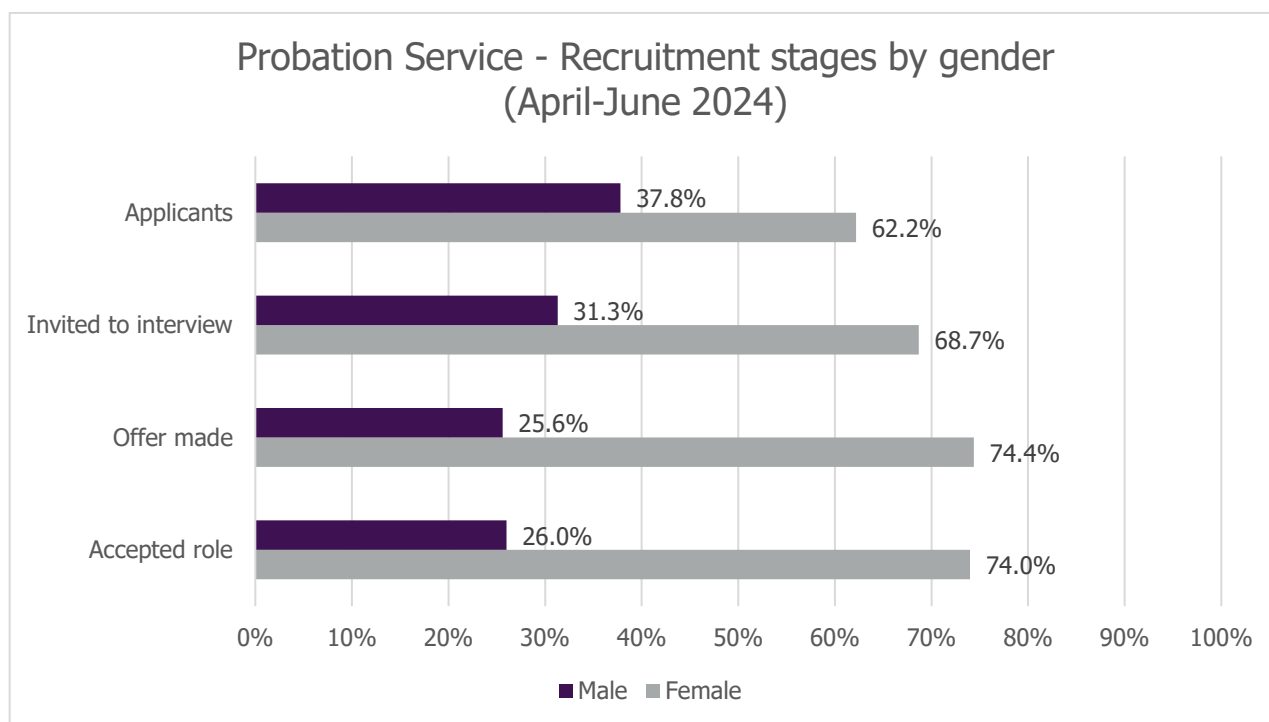


Figure 4: Probation Service recruitment stages by gender, April–June 2024

For the PQiP programme, 81.5 per cent of those starting during the 2023/2024 financial year were female. Those responsible for recruitment told us that opening up non-graduate routes had increased the applications from men in cohort 16 from 21.3 per cent in the previous cohort to 30.4 per cent. However, despite higher application rates, this does not translate to a more equal gender balance in successful candidates. HMPPS is optimistic that widening the eligibility criteria and offering qualification routes to individuals who do not have a degree will support a more diverse workforce, but this will need to be monitored and reviewed carefully, to ensure that all efforts are being made to achieve greater equity and understand the reasons why the proportion of men drops throughout the application process.

Age

The age demographic of probation staff is shown in Figure 5, alongside the ages of PQiP starters from the 2023/2024 financial year in Figure 6.

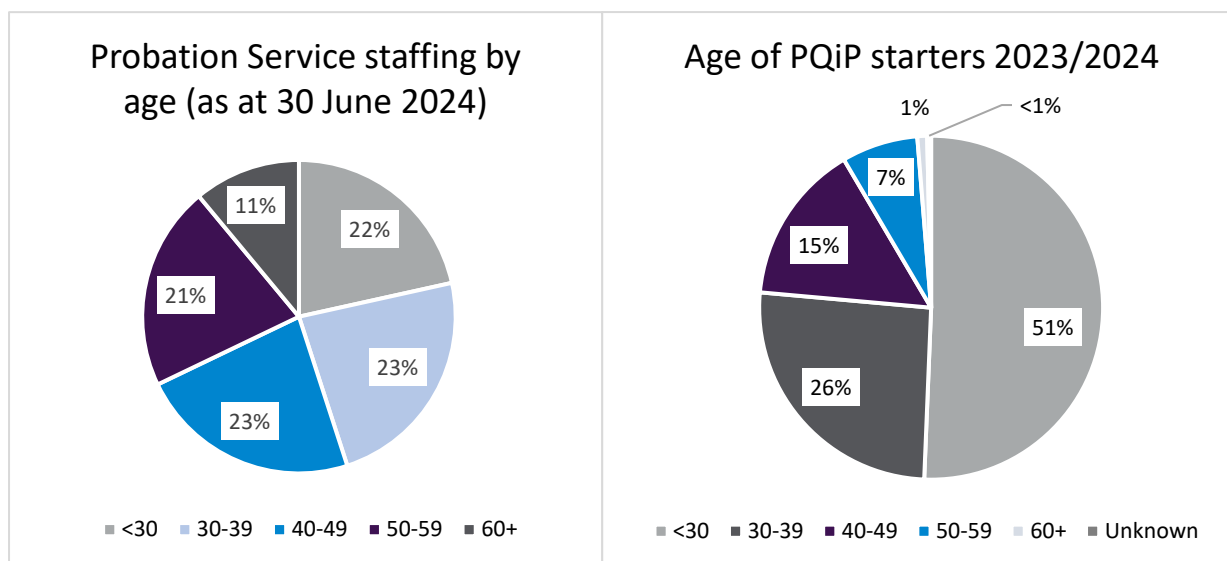


Figure 5: Probation Service staffing by age, as of 30 June 2024

Figure 6: Age of PQiP starters during 2023/2024 financial year

For those applying for the PQiP programme in the 2023/2024 financial year, over 50 per cent were under 30 years of age. The review of the marketing campaign for cohort 16 acknowledged that, despite the introduction of the non-graduate pathway and more targeted marketing, there was no noticeable shift in the age distribution of applicants from previous campaigns. Some managers noted that there are specific expectations about working with people on probation aged under 25, as there is recognition that they are not yet fully mature, yet, although a high number of trainees are also under this age, this is not fully considered.

Ethnicity

National data for PQiP starters shows positive improvement in the proportion of trainees from ethnic minorities (see Figures 7 and 8).

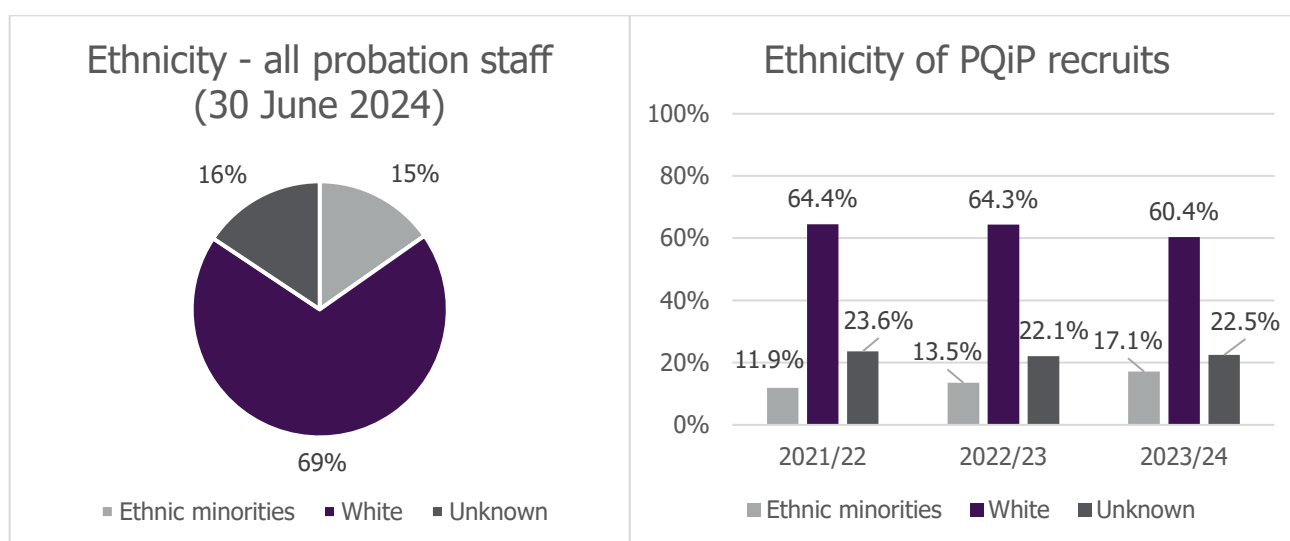


Figure 7: Ethnicity of all probation staff, as of 30 June 2024

Figure 8: Ethnicity of PQiP recruits across financial years from 2021 to 2024

In our regional discussions, we heard that this does not always translate into representative staffing in local PDUs, which can have very different demographics from the overall regions they are situated in. Some local activity was taking place in some regions to engage with communities and raise awareness of probation services as a career. Some regions have undertaken targeted activity to engage with community groups to raise awareness about Probation Service careers.

The proportions of white and ethnic minority applicants through the recruitment stages are shown in Figure 9, and demonstrate that the proportion of ethnic minority candidates drops considerably between application and a provisional offer being made. The reasons for this need to be understood.

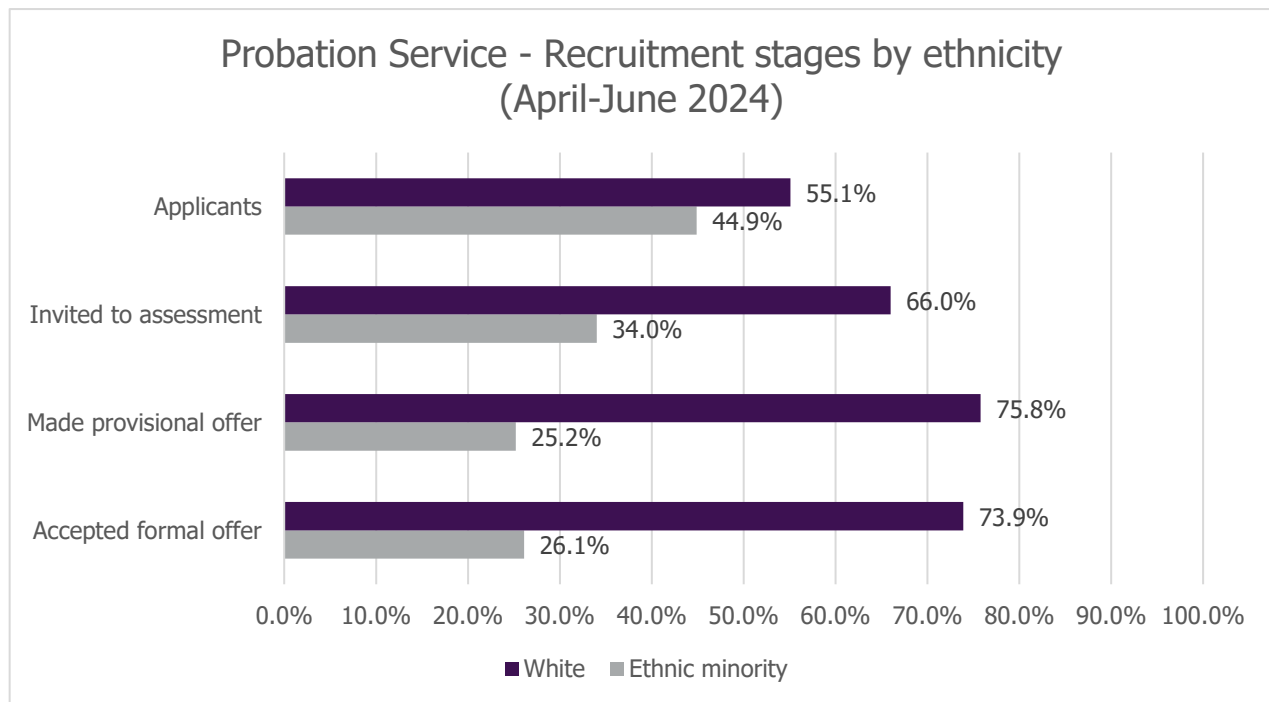


Figure 9: Probation Service recruitment stages by ethnicity April–June 2024

In Wales, we heard about a pilot programme aimed at improving the diversity of the workforce, as described below.

Good practice example – positive action officer, Wales

The Probation Service in Wales has appointed a positive action officer, whose role is to promote Probation Service roles, targeting ethnic minority communities to attract candidates from more diverse backgrounds. They also offer a ‘buddy’ scheme to support individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds through the recruitment process. It is early in the project to measure the tangible results, but feedback from stakeholders has been positive.

Health and disability

The latest available data shows that 20 per cent of probation staff and 14 per cent of PQiP recruits have declared a disability (see Figures 10 and 11).

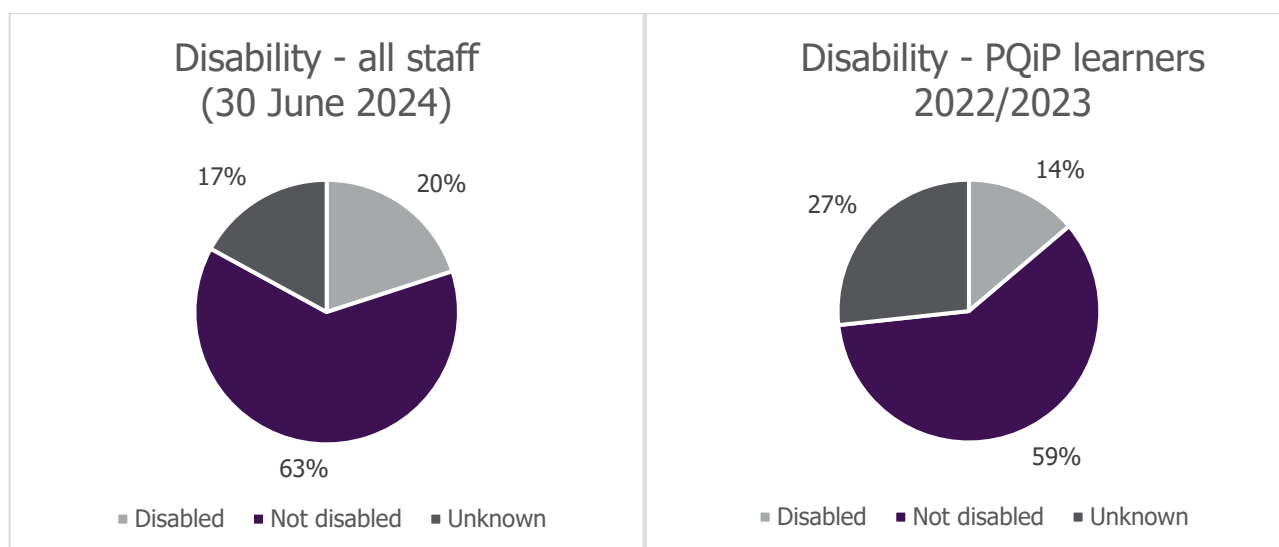


Figure 10: Proportion of Probation Service staff with disclosed disability, as of 30 June 2024

Figure 11: Proportion of PQiP learners recruited with disclosed disability during 2022/2023 financial year

A common complaint we heard during our fieldwork related to poor communication about the health needs of new starters. Some recruits told us that, despite having disclosed conditions, their managers were unaware of their needs when they started work, and necessary reasonable adjustments were not in place. The intended process is that where health-related needs are disclosed during the application process, these are assessed for a range of potential outcomes: firstly, if concerns or adjustments are needed to allow the candidate to carry out their role; secondly, if there is a need for a display screen assessment or equipment; and, thirdly, in the case of more complex needs, if an occupational health assessment is needed. For more complex needs, liaison is needed with local HRBPs to discuss whether the service can meet the candidate's needs in a way that is considered reasonable for the role for which they have applied. The process was widely felt to be improving, but still needs to improve in practice.

Managers and HRBPs in most areas told us that information was often missing when people started, or that pre-employment reports were not sufficiently detailed to allow them to make appropriate provisions. Even when candidates have transferred from other roles within the Probation Service or the wider Civil Service, information about their needs is not always passed on. We were given examples of recruits sharing occupational health reports after they had started that would call into question their ability to carry out their role, even with reasonable adjustments, which had caused distress for the candidate and excessive work for the manager in trying to address the issues. Managers within the Probation Service expressed concerns that their understanding of fitness for the role and those of the organisations which were completing the assessments were not aligned, potentially due to a lack of understanding of the operational realities of probation work. Despite wanting to accommodate a diverse staff group, managers emphasised that some suggestions for reasonable adjustments went far beyond what could be considered reasonable in the context of the roles they had been appointed to. In all cases, operational managers need to understand the needs of their staff at the earliest possible opportunity, to enable them to take all possible steps to make relevant provisions for new starters. One recruit described the impact of this process not working effectively. They told us:

"I found out two weeks before that I was actually going to start as the communication was poor despite people chasing things. I had to arrange childcare within that period. It doesn't flow seamlessly at all. I also need reasonable adjustments. I needed an occupational health report and getting things in place has taken over five months so far, and it is still not all in place."

Unlike for those with other protected characteristics, the proportion of candidates with a disability does not reduce through the recruitment stages (see Figure 12).

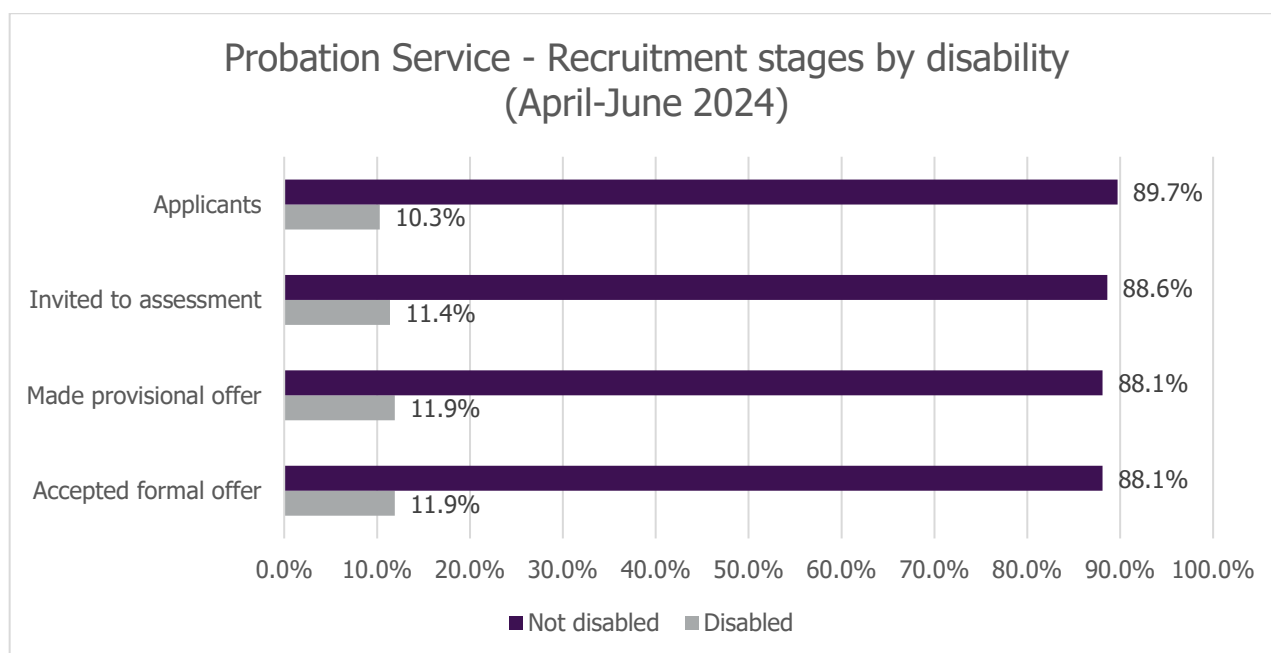


Figure 12: Probation Service recruitment stages by disability, April–June 2024

Veterans

HMPPS offers specific arrangements for those who have served in the armed forces and their civil partner or spouse. Through the Advance into Justice scheme, which was piloted in 2023, successful candidates can be offered two-year fixed-term contracts, with the opportunity to move into permanent roles after successfully completing one year. The scheme is available to those who have been in the armed forces or are due to leave within 18 months. This scheme was originally aimed at attracting prison officers but has broadened in remit to include Probation Service roles. Recruits are offered additional support through the scheme in making the adjustment from being in the military, which can include relocation costs. Although numbers of staff coming through the scheme have been small, with two case administrators and five PSOs, this is a positive initiative which, it is hoped, will continue to grow. The scheme has been awarded the Commissioners' Mark of Excellence.

2.9. Conclusions and implications

Considerable effort and activity have been put into improving staffing levels within the Probation Service in recent years, resulting in high numbers of new recruits. However, due to increased target staffing levels, there are still shortfalls in practitioner grades. For PSOs, it is hard to understand staffing levels clearly because PQiP learners are counted in their number. Workforce planning arrangements need to be better supported by more user-friendly IT solutions that service the needs of both regional and national teams. Better consultation is needed to understand these needs.

While numbers entering the Service have been promising, there also needs to be due consideration of whether candidates with the right qualities, skills, and capabilities, who have aspirations for long Probation Service careers, are being attracted and selected. Adjustments are needed to the recruitment process to ensure that practitioners enter the service with realistic expectations about their roles, and the right skills and resilience. A robust evaluation is needed to explore the outcomes of each PQiP cohort, to understand fully which recruitment approaches have achieved the best number of successful completions and longer-term positive performance in PO roles. In addition, lessons could be learned from similar professions that require a more robust level of experience before joining, to equip new starters better for the roles they are taking on. Attention is being paid to the diversity of the staff group. Still, more needs to be done to understand why men and people from ethnic minorities have less successful recruitment outcomes than women and white candidates.

3. Training

This section examines Probation Service training. Beginning with the overarching policy and strategy, we then report on the training and support arrangements that are in place for PSOs, trainee POs, and NQOs. Finally, we consider the recently launched Probation Service professional register.

3.1. Policy, strategy, and leadership

The *Probation Service Recruitment and Retention Strategy (2021–2024)* (HMPPS, 2023a) includes a commitment to support leaders in building a learning culture that demonstrates the impact of self-development. A *Learning Strategy for the Probation Service (2022–2024)* (HMPPS, 2022) sets out how this aim will be delivered via a framework of four learning categories: mandatory, required for the role, desirable for the role, and optional. The document acknowledges that high workloads have inhibited learning and development activity, but sets out an aspiration that this will change as caseloads reduce. It sets out the four strategic aims: to place the learner at the heart of learning, enabling meaningful learning experiences irrespective of the role that the learner is in; to enable learners to prioritise time and space for learning; to maximise use of technology to improve the accessibility and quality of learning undertaken; and to work collaboratively across HMPPS with external partners, to create learning experiences with impact.

Strategic responsibility for learning and development now sits within the transforming delivery directorate of HMPPS, having moved from the probation workforce programme. Three teams have distinct areas of responsibility for different elements of the work:

1. The probation capability function is accountable for strategy, policies, curriculum decisions, and national projects relating to probation practice, including professional qualifications.
2. The probation learning design faculty is responsible for managing commissions and designing new learning, and evaluating and continuously improving existing learning products they have designed.
3. The probation professional registration function is responsible for introducing the internal professional register and is due to consult on developing this further, with an ambition to move towards external regulation.

The delivery of learning and development sits with the probation learning delivery function, split into three sub-functions:

1. The central function of the learning services delivery is a geographically dispersed team of POs, PSOs, and staff with previous teaching experience, who deliver the learning modules of the PQiP programme and the PSO curriculum. This team has strong links with the design faculty and collaborates on new learning products. It also quality assures delivery and provides learner feedback to the design faculty to refine products. All events that the team delivers are online via Microsoft Teams, with up to 12 learners in a group. Delivery uses interactive activities such as virtual whiteboards, polls, break-out rooms, video and audio clips, and case studies to support learning. Events are booked, and attendance is recorded on the My Learning platform. This team delivered 15 products during 2023, offering 34,000 learning places.
2. The second function is the regional learning services function, which includes probation learning leads, learning managers, practice tutor assessors, vocational qualification (VQ) level 3 assessors, project managers, and administrators. The remit of this group is the delivery of the PQiP programme within regions.
3. The third strand is the probation professional pathways team, which manages outsourced contracts, including the higher education institutes, which deliver the academic component

of the PQiP programme. This team is responsible for the VQ centre and the progression board which learners are referred to if concerns about their progress arise. This team has recently also started overseeing the IT arrangements element of PQiP onboarding.

Learning and development work is overseen by a range of governance forums, including a probation learning and development performance board, whose terms of reference are to review and analyse performance data and management information related to learning and development, taking action where necessary to drive improvement. There is also a learning and development model senior management team, whose role is to provide strategic direction and governance, ensuring that resources are deployed effectively, and that duplication is reduced.

Competency-based pay framework (CBF)

In April 2022, the Probation Service launched a CBF, following a one-year trial period. The change aligned the Probation Service with the wider Civil Service by ending automatic pay progression. To progress upwards on their pay scale, staff who are not already at the top are required to demonstrate competence in their role. There are three levels: advanced for staff who have developed and demonstrated mastery; intermediate for staff who are established in their role and practised in their skillset, and staff who have developed firm knowledge and proven practice; and entry for staff new to, or newly developing in, the role or skillset. To receive pay progression, Probation Service staff must demonstrate competence in six areas, regardless of the role: risk, legislation, policy and procedure, service delivery, teamwork, and decision-making. Managers must record that their staff member has achieved competence via a closing conversation at the end of the financial year, to allow them to receive their pay progression.

Staff and managers view the CBF process as bureaucratic, with little meaningful impact on competence. Some managers expressed concerns that it reduces learning to a 'tick box' exercise, which should not be the case. Many staff said that the process drives a flurry of activity to complete mandatory training within the deadlines of the process, and many said that their motivation is only to complete the required training to fulfil the CBF requirements, and that they pay minimal attention to it. Some HRBPs told us that they did not understand the process and felt that it was an over-complex way of addressing automatic pay progression which did not align to Civil Service processes.

3.2. Inductions

All staff members joining the Probation Service should have an induction, introducing them to the Service and their role. The national induction framework guide, introduced in March 2024, sets out the expectations for how regions should induct staff. The document acknowledges that regions have their own arrangements in place and that it is not designed to replace these; rather, it was developed in response to feedback from staff who were unclear about how their role fitted with the wider criminal justice system and how the work of other parts of the Probation Service fitted with their role. The document covers activities that should take place in the first three weeks in post and is a useful guide for managers, particularly in regard to the activities they should support a new starter to complete. As part of our inspection fieldwork, we observed some induction activity for new PQiP starters, including the delivery of materials developed as part of this framework, including recorded materials about the journey through the criminal justice system. We found the materials to be engaging, giving a helpful overview of how probation work fits into the criminal justice system.

Some staff who had recently joined the Service reported that they were told by their managers to arrange to shadow other teams as part of their induction. However, they found this daunting as they did not always know who to approach and were conscious of how busy staff were, which led to them not always undertaking the activity that was anticipated. Not all staff were allocated a mentor or buddy, as suggested in the framework, which could have supported arranging these activities. PSOs in some regions had set up chat forums to discuss their experiences, which they described as helpful.

Some recent PSO recruits described poor experiences of induction and felt that there needed to be a better process; some had not been shown around the building they were based in, while others had not had access to a laptop computer for a few weeks, which limited what they could do. In the worst cases, there had been no manager available to meet them on arrival, on day one. The benefits of a good induction were apparent to those who had had a positive experience and immediately felt welcomed and valued.

Regional learning and development teams told us that they recognised the need to support PSO staff joining the organisation; however, they found this a challenge as their resources were predicated on supporting PQiPs only. Where numbers of PQiP had increased, some regions had had to reduce their engagement with PSO induction and early training.

3.3. Probation training

As outlined in the *Learning Strategy for the Probation Service (2022–2024)* (HMPPS, 2022), there are four categories of learning: mandatory, required for the role, desirable for the role, and optional.

Mandatory training

These are courses that must be completed by all practitioners, and these include modules such as Civil Service expectations, counter fraud, bribery and corruption, health and safety, security and data protection, child safeguarding awareness, safeguarding adults eLearning, and domestic abuse awareness eLearning. There are also online facilitated courses for adult safeguarding, child safeguarding, and domestic abuse. The completion rates vary, but the safeguarding-related eLearning modules now have high completion rates. Completion rates for online facilitated events are improving but are lower, and less than 50 per cent for each course.

Mandatory training must be completed yearly, every two years, or every three years, depending on the course. Practitioners said that they get through mandatory learning as quickly as possible and do not always fully engage with the materials. A comment typical of many we heard was:

“We only do mandatory eLearning to tick them off for the CBF. I click through it as quickly as possible and gain little from it.”

Some practitioners found value in being able to return to eLearning and go back over materials, and saw this as a benefit of this method of learning.

Role-specific training and foundation learning

The PQiP and PSO learning and development curriculum framework, updated in March 2024, sets out a revised curriculum designed to ensure that PQiP learners and PSOs are equipped with the core skills, knowledge, and understanding required for their roles. The document describes that modifications have been made following feedback about the sequencing and volume of information in the previous iteration that some learners had experienced knowledge saturation, with too little opportunity to practice, embed, and apply core skills. The revised framework is therefore based, in part, on introducing learning at the point of need. The framework also asserts that the offer for PQiP learners and PSOs should be equitable.

The following modules are the current suite of foundation learning that PSOs and PQiP learners receive.

Foundation learning 1	(FL1): Core skills and key concepts	One-hour eLearning
Foundation learning 2	(FL2): Risk management, risk assessment, and sentence planning (eLearning)	Two-hour eLearning
Foundation learning 3	(FL3): Core skills and key concepts (days 1 and 2)	Two-day facilitated learning

Foundation learning 4	(FL4): Risk fundamentals	One-day facilitated learning
Foundation learning 5	(FL5): Offender assessment system (OASys) practitioner skills	One-day facilitated learning
Foundation learning 6	(FL6): Report writing and presentation skills	eLearning and skills practice
Foundation learning 7	(FL7): Risk assessment, risk management, and sentence planning	One-day facilitated learning
Foundation learning 8	(FL8): Core skills and key concepts reflections	One-day facilitated learning

In addition, there is a range of other required learning, including training on the nDelius case management system, trauma-informed practice awareness (eLearning), substance misuse (eLearning), introduction to mental health (eLearning), working with individuals who commit sexual offences (eLearning and skills practice), recall (eLearning), the home detention curfew process (eLearning), parole and oral hearing (eLearning and virtually facilitated), and multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) (eLearning).

Most regions were supplementing the training on some of these topics with their own products, delivered by PTAs. In particular, the central OASys training was described as insufficient and needed additional sessions to build competence.

The design faculty devises and evaluates the core learning products which form the basis of practitioner training. A framework is in place which sets out how products should have evaluation built in from the start of design, to understand how the impact of the product will be measured. Evaluation can be completed at four levels, to capture reaction and planned action immediately after completion, learning from the event, application and behaviour change captured at a later stage, and other measures to capture the impact of the product across all learners – for example, an improvement in a particular area of practice. The advisory panel on probation learning can also be called on to advise on evaluation. This is a comprehensive framework which should provide a thorough overview of impact if completed as intended; however, the proportion of learners who provide feedback is low for some products, which may skew the feedback provided. The views expressed by learners, managers, and PTAs about some of the training products during our fieldwork differed from those gathered by the design faculty. For example, we heard frequent complaints about the quality of OASys training, but the design faculty reported that the course has had positive responses.

During our fieldwork, inspectors were able to observe delivery of some of the foundational learning modules. In our observations, facilitators set clear learning outcomes in most events, and explained what attendees could expect from the event. Generally, inspectors found that the methods of delivery were suited to the materials, although skills practice elements were not always delivered as intended; for example, trainers were not able to monitor breakout groups and therefore were not aware of the nature of the discussions that took place. Some issues were observed when attendees were trying to navigate platforms such as OASys, and, due to online delivery, the trainer could not always support them effectively. Facilitators we observed were skilled in delivering training and most were knowledgeable about the subject matter. On a few occasions, facilitators described that they were not familiar with probation practice, which had the potential to undermine confidence in their delivery.

Training methods

In January 2024, the HMPPS evidence-based practice team produced *Training for Probation Practitioners: What Works?* This document summarises the best available evidence for the most effective ways to deliver probation practitioner training. The evidence suggests that building learner

motivation to engage with training improves the prospect of retention and use of skills. Building opportunities to reflect on their learning and practice skills is necessary to embed the learning into practice. The evaluation considers methods of delivery and finds that eLearning and online learning can be as, if not more, effective than face-to-face activity for building knowledge and conveying information; however, there is a lack of evidence about the impact of online or eLearning on skills development and the application of learning to professional practice. Further, it states:

'Evaluations of probation training indicate that regular, meaningful, personalised interactions with trainers/tutors and peers are valued highly by learners, and are important in prompting reflective practice, which can be more difficult to achieve through eLearning or online.'

The review concludes that to deliver reflective practice activities, face-to-face learning is likely to be the most beneficial approach, particularly where the participants do not already know each other or the tutor, recognising that it takes time to trust and build a sense of safety to practise skills and engage in meaningful reflection.

The review provides a valuable analysis of learning transfer and how knowledge and skills gained through activities are sustained and lead to meaningful improvements in practice in the short and longer term. A number of elements can increase the effectiveness of learning transfer, including explicit learning aims for events, good-quality supervision and feedback, or coaching that supports learning to be embedded. The organisation's culture is also acknowledged as crucial to learning transfer; in other words, if training is generally valued, it is more likely to be effective.

Our fieldwork fully supports these findings. Our focus group attendees, survey respondents, and interviewees generally acknowledged that there is a place for eLearning and online delivery, but that the balance has tipped too far towards these methods. The efficiencies of virtual learning were well understood, and many staff, especially those with caring responsibilities, were grateful for not having to travel long distances to attend every required training event. However, most people we spoke to also saw multiple drawbacks to virtual learning. While guidance for training advises that learners joining online events do so from a quiet private space where they will not be distracted or disturbed, the reality was that this was not always followed. Learners reported that they were often distracted by emails, Microsoft Teams messages, or colleagues who, while acknowledging that they were on training, often asked them to complete a task despite this commitment. Some learners said that they struggled to find quiet spaces within their office, or even at home, and, therefore, had to join from their desks in open-plan offices, which was less than ideal. Many we spoke to said that they rarely engaged as thoroughly with online learning as they would in a classroom setting. Those attending online training described that, while the facilitators often asked people to keep their cameras on, this was not always followed. As part of our fieldwork, we were able to observe some training events, and we also found that this was the case; some attendees were not visible and gave little indication that they were engaged in the materials. In one example, a learner could be seen to have a television on during the event. Virtual breakout rooms are often used to allow participants to practise skills, but our fieldwork and direct observations indicated that these opportunities were rarely used as intended. A comment typical of what we heard was:

"I have had many instances where we are put in breakout rooms to do skills practice and no one turns their camera on or talks."

Some practitioners told us that they were uncomfortable engaging in role plays with people they did not know in a virtual setting, but felt that in a face-to-face situation they would be better able to develop a sense of safety and engage more fully.

We also heard from a range of sources, including practitioners, managers, senior leaders, PTAs, and university tutors, that it was not appropriate or effective to try to build skills to support face-to-face engagement with people on probation through online means. Many reflected the view that training needs to replicate reality as far as possible, to allow practitioners to become aware of their non-verbal behaviours and the impact these can have on relationships. One practitioner told us:

“Training is pretty much online now; it is not conducive with being a reflective practitioner or building relational skills.”

During our fieldwork, when we asked about practitioners’ general training experiences, most initially described process-focused events such as how to use nDelius or navigating OASys. Only after prompting did we hear about learning aimed at supporting them in building skills to engage people on probation, structuring supervision sessions, or behavioural practices such as pro-social modelling or how to promote desistance. We were concerned that there was a greater emphasis on the more tangible aspects of learning, rather than on the complex skills that take longer to develop. The *Training for Probation Practitioners: What Works?* review describes research that suggests that progress on more abstract concepts is likely to be lost without consistent practice and feedback. Through our fieldwork, we found that, while some support is available through PTA support for PQiP learners, this follow-up was not consistently part of practitioners’ learning experiences and, overall, was insufficient.

3.4. PSOs

We designed our focus groups to bring together practitioners with a similar length of experience in role. Practitioners who had been in role for longer periods often described a poor experience of training; they told us that there was no clear programme to follow, and that they often felt that they were expected to start working with people on probation with little direction or guidance. While PSOs were encouraged to observe practice, this was usually on an ad-hoc basis and often relied on finding colleagues who were willing to allow them to shadow, rather than being planned for. Comments typical of what we heard were:

“I thought it was a strange process, to be honest. It’s almost like you are parachuted into an office and told to get on with it. When you are dropped in an office, you’re almost left on your own.”

“My experience of ‘training’ in this role was primarily self-taught, on the job learning and arguably a ‘trial by fire’.”

More recent recruits were more positive, describing a clearer structure to their training, with typical comments including:

“I had very comprehensive training, the Gateway to Practice booklet was also good.”

“I do think the training we receive adequately equips us for the job, and I have been really happy with the standard of training we have received.”

“The training is predominantly online with some face-to-face sessions. I have found the online training very good. It is more interactive than I thought it would be, the pace works well and the content is relevant and well organised. The trainers are knowledgeable and accommodating.”

A range of views were expressed about the sequencing; some PSOs felt that they needed to have had training on nDelius as soon as they joined, whereas others who had been trained early felt that they had forgotten much of it by the time they were allocated cases, months later. We also heard that some of the early learning seemed abstract, as learners did not have the experience to make the necessary links between what they were learning and how to apply it. One PSO told us:

“At the beginning there are so many acronyms, and ‘you don’t know what you don’t know’, it would be helpful to have a mop up and some reviewing to make sure you are getting things right. I didn’t know things about risk registers. So, even though during a lot of the eLearning I made notes ... as I didn’t have any cases I didn’t know how to apply this and it was only when I got cases that this made sense.”

The majority of PSOs felt that having a mentor would have benefited them, but few had had this opportunity. A small number of PSOs had received structured feedback on their work, other than on the quality of their OASys assessments. OASys training was often described as being unfit for purpose as it did not prepare them adequately to understand the risk assessment process and how to fit their assessment into the required format. Few PSOs described having been observed in their practice.

A strong theme from PSOs was a lack of follow-up to training. Many we spoke to could not describe how it was ensured that they had successfully embedded learning into their practice. They reported that managers often checked whether they had attended learning events but did not explore the content in any depth. One PSO told us:

“No reflective discussions took place; therefore my learning was not consolidated. I don’t know if I have taken the right messages away.”

Some regions had introduced more structured help for PSOs, using support from PTAs to deliver workshops, and mentoring to help consolidate learning into practice. In regions where there was a clear support structure, PSOs were more positive and confident about their progress as they had been given opportunities to reflect, discuss aspects of their work, and receive structured feedback.

VQ – level 3

PSOs are expected to undertake a VQ at level 3 (VQ3) within 12 months of starting their role. Nationally, this is not yet being achieved. There are challenges with resourcing the programme, given the already high demand for PTAs to support PQiP learners. As a result, most regions have recruited assessors specifically for the VQ3, to support their provision. Our fieldwork found that, when completed at the right time, completing the VQ3 has a range of benefits. PSOs told us that throughout completion, they were given constructive feedback, had observations, and were able to have reflective discussions about their practice that they had not previously had. A comment representative of many we heard was:

“The VQ3 gave me feedback and confidence and reassured me. Through completing it I found out I was doing a good job, before that I wasn’t sure.”

Timing was felt to be important, as those who had been asked to complete the VQ3 after being in their role for longer periods gained less from it and found it more of a tick-box process than meaningful development.

The VQ3 has not been reviewed for some time and, as a result, PTAs expressed concern that it is now more onerous to complete than the newest version, VQ5, required as part of the PQiP programme. Plans are in development to implement an apprenticeship for PSOs which will replace the VQ3, but there is no firm date for when this will start.

Overall, we found that the structure of training for PSOs is improving, but there is still room for improvement to offer more structured support to ensure that training has the intended impact on practice. Allocating experienced mentors to new starters has been problematic due to staffing shortages; when resources allow, this should be a routine expectation. Being able to observe colleagues in their work is a valued part of the learning process, and arrangements to provide this should be strengthened to ensure that a coordinated period of observation is provided for all new PSO early in their service.

3.5. PQiP

Within the PQiP programme, there are three core elements: the completion of the vocational diploma in probation practice at level 5, completion of academic modules at levels 5 and 6, and completion of required role-based learning (outlined above).

The PQiP programme was reviewed in 2021, with recommendations that impacted on each element of the programme. A key recommendation from the review was to broaden the entry pathways,

particularly to diversify the probation workforce. The content of the course was also revised and reorganised, with the aim of creating better alignment between the academic element, vocational component, and professional development. The review also sought to enhance the learner experience, recommending that a mechanism should be created to use attrition data to provide trend analysis at national and regional levels, to understand why candidates leave. The review also recommended that attention be paid to instilling a sense of belonging in candidates through an improved model of support, including the provision of mentors.

VQ5 diploma in probation practice

This element of the PQiP programme is awarded by Skills for Justice Awards. It is a level 5 VQ in which learners are assessed as competent or not yet competent. It comprises six mandatory units:

- Understand probation practice.
- Demonstrate probation values and professional behaviours.
- Assess and manage the risk, needs, and responsivity of individuals.
- Engage individuals on probation and in custody to support positive change.
- Rehabilitate, resettle, and promote desistance from crime.
- Produce and present reports for formal hearings.

Candidates must show competence in their practice across a range of work activities, including working with people on probation serving community orders and custodial sentences (including those who pose a higher risk of serious harm), contributing to multi-agency work, and preparing reports for formal hearings. The handbook for the qualification sets out the total qualification time as 460 hours, of which 98 are guided learning hours, examples of which are classroom-based learning, webinars, and eLearning. The current iteration of the diploma was introduced in 2023, following revisions to update the content and modernise the qualification. PTAs are responsible for gathering and judging evidence against the criteria for each module during the candidate's normal working activities.

The increased demand for PTA resource due to higher numbers of PQiP learners in recent years, combined with shortages in staff groups that new PTA could be drawn from, drove a review of arrangements for PQiP delivery. In addition, learning from a Serious Further Offence review caused the Probation Service to revise the case assignment of learners, restricting the allocation of certain types of cases until trainees had received relevant training, which meant that their casework experience started later in their training. Therefore, the assessment period was moved to the latter nine months of the programme. A review of the new arrangements found that, while there had been early concerns that the assessment period would be too short, this was not in fact the case. During our fieldwork, although we heard concerns that the period was too short for some candidates, this often related to a view that those candidates were not on the programme duration that best suited their needs.

For those on the 15-month programme, assessment starts six months into the programme; for the 21-month pathway, it starts at 13 months. Initially, PTA involvement did not start until assessment commenced (which had been two months into the programme), but many regions are now allocating PTAs to the learner much earlier, to start to build relationships and work towards assessment. This has been well received by PTAs and learners.

During our fieldwork, some PTAs said that they felt the revised diploma, which has reduced the number of modules and also the number of times that each criterion has to be met, has lowered the evidence required to meet the criteria. This has led to concerns about whether it provides a rigorous enough assessment of a candidate's skills and knowledge. There were differing levels of understanding among PTAs about whether they needed to see competence against criteria demonstrated more than once.

Academic learning

The academic component of PQiP is delivered by four higher education institutes (HEIs), which were awarded three-year contracts following a competitive tendering process. Each HEI was able to design its own course, including delivery methods, to meet a set of learning outcomes that are consistent to all. Contracts were awarded in geographical lots, which means that establishments are often distant from the regions they deliver to. For this reason, most deliver the majority of their content by way of eLearning or online learning. During our focus groups, all of the HEIs reported that they would favour more face-to-face delivery, but that this would not be possible within the financial constraints of their contracts. Establishments vary in whether they offer synchronous (where learners attend online events at the same time) or asynchronous (where learners work through materials at their own pace) delivery. Seminars are offered to consolidate learning. Focus groups with HEIs highlighted that they feel compromised in how they are delivering. One attendee told us:

"It is bad teaching the style we are using but we have no choice about this. We have no chance to be a community of learners."

Another common concern expressed was that the academic component was not given sufficient priority by operational managers. Tutors often heard that SPOs had told learners that, as sessions were recorded, they could catch up in their own time, in order to prioritise work tasks. One HEI told us that up to 50 per cent of learners were asking for extensions to essay deadlines. HEIs identified that there needed to be stronger protection for learning time, and several said that they had advocated for having a set study day for all learners, across all of the HEIs, to ensure that time was protected and also enable them to provide more drop-in or additional support sessions. However, they had been told that this was not possible.

Overall, we found that there was insufficient coordination and appreciation of the academic component among managers and PTAs for them to support learners sufficiently in understanding how their university modules linked to their practice. This also impacted on the value that learners then placed on the academic component. One PTA told us:

"The learners I speak to do not value the university work – it seems like the way the curriculum is delivered; however, I don't know enough about the academic programme to know either what exactly the problem is or the solution."

When asked about how familiar they were with the content of the university modules or training that learners were undertaking, one SPO told us:

"I don't need to know; I only need to know when I can give them cases."

Many PQiP learners told us that their managers prioritised sentence management tasks above the other elements of their programme, and that once they had been given cases, they often struggled to fit in other commitments. Some felt that the programme could be sequenced differently, to allow a greater focus on academic learning and avoid it being compromised by casework commitments. Some learners struggled to align their academic learning with the realities of practice. One said:

"Some practice expectations went against the teaching – e.g. breaching somebody regardless of where they were on the cycle of change."

Line management, support, and mentoring

Line management arrangements for PQiP learners differ across regions. In some areas, there are dedicated PQiP SPOs who manage learners exclusively. By contrast, in other regions PQiPs are managed by SPOs as part of sentence management teams. The rationale behind these decisions often depends on the number of learners in the local area. In regions with a higher volume of learners, it is more feasible to have a specialist manager, whereas in areas with more geographically dispersed learners, this approach is less effective. Our fieldwork showed that learners with specialist SPOs had a better experience, as their managers had a greater overall understanding of the

programme they were undertaking. SPOs managing generic teams did not have capacity to learn about the programme in detail alongside their already broad role. Even specialist SPOs had limited knowledge of the content of the foundational learning modules; some had asked for details, but had been told that this was not available. Managers felt that this severely limited their ability to test whether learners had embedded knowledge. The national training team assured us that there were plans to address this and provide managers with the information they need.

Staffing shortages and the relatively inexperienced workforce have restricted the capacity of managers to allocate mentors to learners. Some regions have tried to provide assistance in different ways, through mentoring hubs or additional support days provided by PTAs. While this offers some valuable help, it does not directly replace having an identified, experienced colleague who can provide more immediate support and guidance. Learners are often well supported by colleagues in the offices they work in, but many told us that they try not to place too many demands on their colleagues as they know how busy they are. They felt that having a nominated mentor would encourage them to gain assistance when they needed it.

As part of the range of learning experiences, PQiP learners are expected to co-work cases, to gain experience of working with people on probation assessed as posing a higher risk of causing serious harm. Trainee POs are expected to work alongside experienced POs, with agreed tasks being delivered by the learner while the PO retains overall responsibility for the case. In practice, the boundaries of these relationships often slip, which results in the learner undertaking almost all tasks, with little oversight from the qualified officer. A comment from one trainee represented the views we heard from many:

“Co-working has been extremely frustrating for me. This was supposed to be a learning opportunity; however, it was treated by SPOs as a means for me to do the work of a PO without the qualification, training, or pay to align with this. I cannot see that this is going to be different in my PDU once I qualify.”

Another expressed concerns that they did not always know what to look for, in terms of assessing increasing risk, but were largely being left to manage the case and only consult the PO when they needed to. Their concern was that they would not recognise when this was the case, which left them feeling vulnerable.

Balancing the demands of the programme was a consistent theme among PQiP learners, who often felt that they were given conflicting guidance about what the priorities were. Typical comments we heard included:

“Much of the training I have completed has been either online via MS Teams or eLearning. There has been little or no follow-up of any of this training. It does not feel as though any consideration is given with regards to workload versus continuous professional development and training is something to squeeze in between work demands.”

“As a PQiP your learning and development takes a back seat once you get cases.”

“We get study days and protected learning times, but we are interrupted, and these are not respected. Most PQiPs do their university work in their own time and on weekends, which adds to stress levels and gives me concerns about coping in the future with a full caseload.”

Staff in all roles, including learners, managers, PTAs, and senior leaders, expressed concern that the 15-month programme is too short to prepare learners comprehensively for the PO role. The need to recruit and train high numbers to fill staffing gaps makes a short programme an attractive prospect, but this becomes a false economy if staff are not retained post-qualification. Managers, PTAs, and, in some cases, learners questioned whether the decision-making on the length of programme that a learner undertakes is sufficiently tailored to individual learners.

Learners often told us that they were overwhelmed by the demands of the programme. One comment that represented many was:

"I feel that I've been given so much complex information in such a short space of time. I started in January 2023 and so much of the online training was at the beginning, with no time to embed it in practice and so information simply went into my head and straight out again! Then the shock of having to complete the L5 and L6 within the last nine months – it's too much! We're supposed to have one university day and a VQ day in each week but there's been too many times when I've had to cancel these due to workload pressures."

The *Community Justice Learning: User Manual* (HMPPS, 2022a) states:

'Learners are an integral part of the operational team and as such must balance their caseload with the learning requirements.'

This needs effective communication, to ensure that all staff have clear expectations about what is reasonable in achieving this balance.

A longer-term comprehensive evaluation is needed, to understand whether the length of programme has an impact on longer-term retention and performance in role.

Placements

It is intended that trainee POs undertake placements to experience probation functions in addition to their work in sentence management teams. These may include courts, approved premises, unpaid work teams, and prisons. However, we found that these vary significantly in length and the quality of experience they provide. Not all learners we spoke to had been offered a placement. Some learners described placements of a few days that were, in reality, an opportunity to observe, while others described more structured experiences where they were fully immersed in undertaking work. The timing of placements was also important, as some found it disruptive, when they had a caseload, to be placed elsewhere for several weeks. When placements worked well, learners described that the receiving team was well prepared to accommodate them and supported them through the process. One region was trying to arrange placements with accredited programmes teams, which could be a positive experience, given that our findings in other inspections have indicated that practitioners have a lack of knowledge about this area of work. Some candidates were concerned about the sequencing of placements. One told us:

"I only have nine months left of PQiP and university restarts soon, VQ starts in a few weeks, I'm guessing placements will be during that time too which further adds to time demands. I have been off university and have had no training for the last four weeks so a placement would have been ideal now."

3.6. Arrangements for NQOs

The *National Framework for Newly Qualified Officers* (HMPPS, 2024) was published in February 2024 and rolled out in June 2024. The framework sets out the expectations that regions should follow to provide a consistent experience for NQOs following their qualification. The framework includes some mandatory workshops and some that are flexible and at the discretion of regional leaders to determine. The framework states that there is an expectation that regional leaders demonstrate how their approaches provide the necessary assurances that NQOs are being adequately supported, are attaining developmental milestones, and are achieving competence. Arrangements for NQOs include a 20 per cent reduction on the WMT for the first nine months post-qualification. The guidance highlights the means of support that should be considered best practice, but the language is not sufficiently directive and does not place a direct duty on regions to achieve this. For example, it states that, 'A support package should be in place that has direction, structure and links with existing national support structures', rather than that a support package must be in place. We heard consistent concerns that arrangements to support and protect NQOs were already not being adhered to, which gave us concerns that this framework in its current form may not make a meaningful difference unless the measures outlined are compulsory.

NQOs often told us that case allocations came too fast, particularly when they had moved to a new office post-qualification. Many felt that the supported transition period they were promised was not delivered.

NQOs who had retained PTA support were positive about this, but were not always sure what the boundaries of the relationship were, and felt that these needed to be clearer.

Regional training teams expressed concern about whether they were sufficiently resourced to deliver the arrangements for NQOs effectively, as the new framework is not accompanied by additional resources. There is the potential for regions with high numbers of trainees not to have sufficient PTA capacity to meet the suggested commitments to NQOs. In addition, it is not clear how the arrangements will be monitored, to ensure that they are delivered.

Across all roles, it was felt that more needed to be done to support NQOs, as the transition from being a trainee is substantial. Often, NQOs are moved to new offices where there are vacancies, and therefore lose the office-based support they have built with colleagues. They then have to build new relationships and have a new manager. We were told about a number of examples where this transition had not been well managed. A particularly poor example is provided below.

Poor practice example

An NQO had successfully progressed through all components of the PQiP training and had engaged in mentoring support throughout. Upon qualification, they were moved to a new office and therefore had a new SPO, and their mentoring arrangement ended. On arrival at the new office, no induction was offered, nor any tour of the building. A caseload was immediately allocated. The NQO was neurodivergent, but no discussion took place about this during the transition. After a week in the new office, they were signed off as unfit for work due to stress and anxiety, and never returned, choosing to submit their notice rather than return.

Our fieldwork showed that the NQO period is particularly important for those who qualify via the shortest pathway. It is well understood by the designers of the PQiP programme that at the point of qualification there is still much to be learned, and that NQOs should not be considered as fully competent POs. The programme relies on the NQO period to offer a suitable transition.

3.7. Continuous professional development

In June 2022, the probation workforce programme published a *Framework for Continuing Professional Development* (HMPPS, 2022b). Designed to align with the CBF, the document sets out expectations about the activities that individuals should be undertaking, depending on their role. Practitioners can access the relevant learning for their role via the MyLearning online platform, where there is a range of activities they can undertake.

The main barriers we heard to practitioners undertaking additional learning was the pressure of their workloads, which most felt did not allow them capacity to think about further development. One practitioner summarised the views of many, by saying:

“Learning and development takes a back seat. Excessive caseloads and daily reactive practice rather than reflective and planned practice means that learning and development is bottom of the list of priorities.”

Some regions had developed guides to continuing professional development, but these identified pathways out of practitioner roles rather than encouraging development within them. Practitioners with more extended service told us that they used to have opportunities to attend external training to support them in specialising in particular areas of practice, such as sexual offending or working with women, but that these opportunities were no longer available. Few practitioners could describe undertaking learning and development activity besides the mandatory learning or events that regions provided. Most practitioners said that protected learning days in their offices took place at times when there were not expected to be people on probation reporting, however, these varied in

terms of what was delivered. Some offices arranged guest speakers or subject matter experts to attend, and these were usually well received. In other locations, the arrangements were less structured, and other than completing mandatory eLearning, practitioners were not clear about what was expected from them.

A range of comments from our survey respondents about learning and development are provided below.

“On the PQiP, learners have a student email address and can access journals and university libraries. I haven't been able to find out whether there is a resource library for qualified POs to ensure staff can read about developments in criminal justice theory and research, etc.”

“I have worked for the probation service for around 25 years and am always surprised that staff are never asked which training would be helpful for them.”

“As a frontline practitioner I feel stuck – there is no room for development or progression – and for that reason I am left with no option but to look outside of the organisation – an organisation that I once felt passionate and proud to be a part of and thought it would be my lifelong career.”

3.8. Professional register

In April 2023, the Probation Service introduced an interim Probation Professional Register Policy Framework, followed by an update in September 2024 (HMPPS, 2024a), which made its requirements mandatory for staff in roles where the PO qualification is an essential requirement in their job description. A professional register is an official list or database of individuals who meet certain qualifications, competencies, and standards in a particular profession. There has long been an ambition to create a professional register for POs, to recognise their competence and provide assurance to stakeholders that staff have the right qualifications, knowledge, and skills to carry out their roles. In 1997, Paul Senior (then an independent consultant, previously an SPO, and subsequently a professor of criminology) had first suggested a professional register and regulator for POs, in response to the Service's withdrawal from the social work qualification and certification. Senior's paper was rejected by the Home Office (which then oversaw probation services) as too costly.

A professional register and regulatory framework was again proposed by the Probation Institute in 2016 (Probation Institute, 2016). The Institute argued that an 'independent regulatory body for probation, rehabilitation and resettlement' needed to be established, to ensure 'consistent, coherent and agreed standards and qualifications to which all practitioners and managers adhere.' This would be the acknowledgement and establishment of probation work as a profession.

For some professions, registers are held by external bodies and also provide a regulatory function. At present, the probation register is held internally, although there are ambitions for this to change in the future.

The creation of a register is a positive opportunity for the Probation Service to re-establish its identity and support an active learning culture, depending on the requirements it places on practitioners to retain their registered status. At present, the register is at a very early stage and it is too early to understand the impact it will have.

3.9. Conclusions and implications

There is much that is positive about the learning and development offer within the Probation Service, which it has had to deliver at pace and scale to support the volume of new recruits, and this has allowed the service to train and qualify POs at an accelerated rate. The design of training has made good use of new technology to develop efficient methods, but the balance has tipped too far towards virtual methods which are at odds with the relational skills they seek to deliver. Some realignment is needed, to ensure that research into the most effective methods of delivery are being followed. The need to strengthen the training offer for PSOs has been recognised and a more

structured approach is now being taken. It is essential that both PSOs and trainee POs are offered sufficient opportunities to reflect on their development, and that they are supported to recognise how to put their learning into practice.

The trainee PO programme has been revised following the review of the previous iteration. Concerns remain about whether the 15-month programme allows sufficient time for learners to prepare for the PO role. Some of these concerns could be addressed by strengthening the support package for NQOs. The newly published framework offers some hope for this, but does not go far enough in ensuring that the much-needed protections are provided.

There are ambitions for the Probation Service to have a meaningful learning culture, but this has not yet been achieved, in part due to workload pressures. The value and status placed on learning and development need to be elevated, to ensure that it is not simply viewed as a tick-box process.

4. Retention

In this final chapter, we consider how staff retention is managed within the Probation Service, starting with the strategy, before moving on to consider why practitioners leave, drawing on findings from our interviews with former staff.

4.1. Policy and strategy

The *Probation Service Recruitment and Retention Strategy (2021–2024)* (HMPPS, 2023a) describes a range of completed actions aimed at improving the experience of staff, including development opportunities for those close to retirement, a national approach to exit interviews linked to a retention toolkit, and the achievement of a multi-year pay deal. The strategy reports that further work is needed to ensure that the Probation Service is a great organisation to work for. The commitments made in the strategy include closing the gap between target staffing and staff in post, supporting manageable workloads, retaining talent, and providing staff with the skills and resources to manage their mental health, wellbeing, and resilience – all of which are linked to staff retention.

A retention toolkit, available since April 2022, outlines best practice in retention, with the aim of reducing attrition rates and increasing employee engagement. The toolkit was initially designed following research into why people left the Prison Service, but was reviewed in 2021 and found to be relevant to probation staff. It is designed to provide tools and information to improve retention by increasing understanding of the identified 10 drivers of attrition, which it lists as leadership, pay and reward, lack of career progression, induction, learning and development, roles and responsibilities, health and wellbeing, environment, staffing, and ways of working. Using data from exit interviews, leaders and HR staff should be able to identify the top drivers of attrition that apply to their PDU or region, and consult the toolkit for actions and measures that may support a reduction in attrition. In our fieldwork, we found that this toolkit was not widely known about or used among managers and leaders; HR staff were aware of it but none said that it was driving activity. The drivers of attrition were highlighted in some local retention action plans, but the toolkit was not actively used to address the identified patterns.

Since 2021, an exit interview process has been in place which asks questions linked to the 10 drivers of attrition. Leavers are sent a survey and also invited to have an interview with an HRBP. HMPPS reported that an average of 24 per cent of leavers took up the offer of an interview. Any immediate issues warranting attention should be brought to the attention of local senior leaders; all other data is collated nationally and is available to view at national, regional, and PDU level. Further work is planned nationally to consider the demographics of those leaving. Some staff who had left, and those who were considering leaving, felt that exit interviews came too late. They described that meaningful conversations were needed at an earlier stage, to explore what, if anything, could be done to support them to stay. Some managers told us that they were managing staff who they knew were looking to leave, but felt there was little they could do to prevent them from doing so, as they had to ensure that all cases were allocated.

Additional research has taken place to understand why people leave. Detailed internal unpublished research has been undertaken in some high attrition sites, and some with lower attrition, to understand potential causes of resignation and potentially identify good practice. Headlines from this work outlined that workloads in the lower attrition sites were not significantly lower, but staff there were more confident in, and positive about, the leadership team.

The results of the annual Civil Service people survey are also analysed, to provide insights into how staff feel about their work. This can be evaluated at PDU, regional, and national levels, to gain insight and information. Poorly rated elements of the survey have recently included pay and benefits, and leadership and managing change. Senior leaders pay careful attention to the results of the people survey, and action plans are created to address the issues identified.

4.2. Pay and benefits

The arrangements for determining Probation Service pay differ from those for the rest of HMPPS. The current minimum for band 3 PSOs is £26,475, with three further pay points before the band maximum of £31,650. For band 4 POs, the range is £35,130 to £42,000. Since April 2024, to progress to the next pay point, all staff in pay bands 2–6 must demonstrate compliance with the CBF. In August 2024, HMPPS agreed to additions to the existing pay agreement due to the pressure resulting from SDS40, which included temporary enhanced overtime for bands 4–6 and planned pay increases being brought forward from October to April 2024. Many practitioners told us that they felt their pay was not comparable with that for similar roles in other organisations and had not kept pace with the cost of living.

It is hard to compare accurately probation staff pay with that for prison officers as numerous geographical and market forces supplements affect the amount received by the latter. For a prison officer on a 37-hour-per-week contract, the minimum starting pay would be £32,448; however, depending on location, this could be £37,973 for inner London, £36,082 for outer London, or up to £35,948 in parts of the south-east or eastern areas of England.¹¹ However, for probation staff, other than London weighting, which they do receive, no other geographical allowances or market supplement payments are in place to support recruitment in hard-to-fill sites, which are often areas with a high cost of living. Some regions used to have such allowances, but recent claims have been rejected. Prison officers also attract increased pay when they have completed their initial training and additional specialist training, or take on supervisory responsibilities.

Comparable professions outside of HMPPS include police, teaching, and social work. Police constables' pay for those appointed on or after 01 September 2024 is £29,907,¹² with a maximum pay of £48,231. As of 01 September 2024, the minimum pay for a qualified teacher is £31,650 and the maximum is £43,607.¹³ Teachers may also be paid teaching and learning responsibility payments for undertaking these duties outside of the classroom. The National Careers Service website¹⁴ describes that social workers have an average starting pay of £32,000 and a maximum pay of £48,000. Unlike police or prison officers, while undertaking their qualifying training, POs are paid at a PSO salary. Compared with probation work, these roles offer a higher maximum salary within the main grade roles; for probation staff to achieve a similar amount, they would have to move away from a practitioner role.

4.3. Leaver rates

The overall annual leaving rate for Probation Service staff, as of 30 September 2024, was 10.3 per cent – 7.8 per cent for POs, and 12.1 per cent for PSOs. Leaving rates for the past four years are shown in Figure 13.

¹¹ <https://prisonandprobationjobs.gov.uk/roles-at-hmpps/prison-officer/prison-officer-pay/>

¹² Pay scales for police constables as reported by Police Federation, available at: <https://www.polfed.org/resources/pay-scales/constable-pay-scales/>

¹³ <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/advice/pay-pensions/pay-scales/pay-scales-england.html>

¹⁴ <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/job-profiles/social-worker>

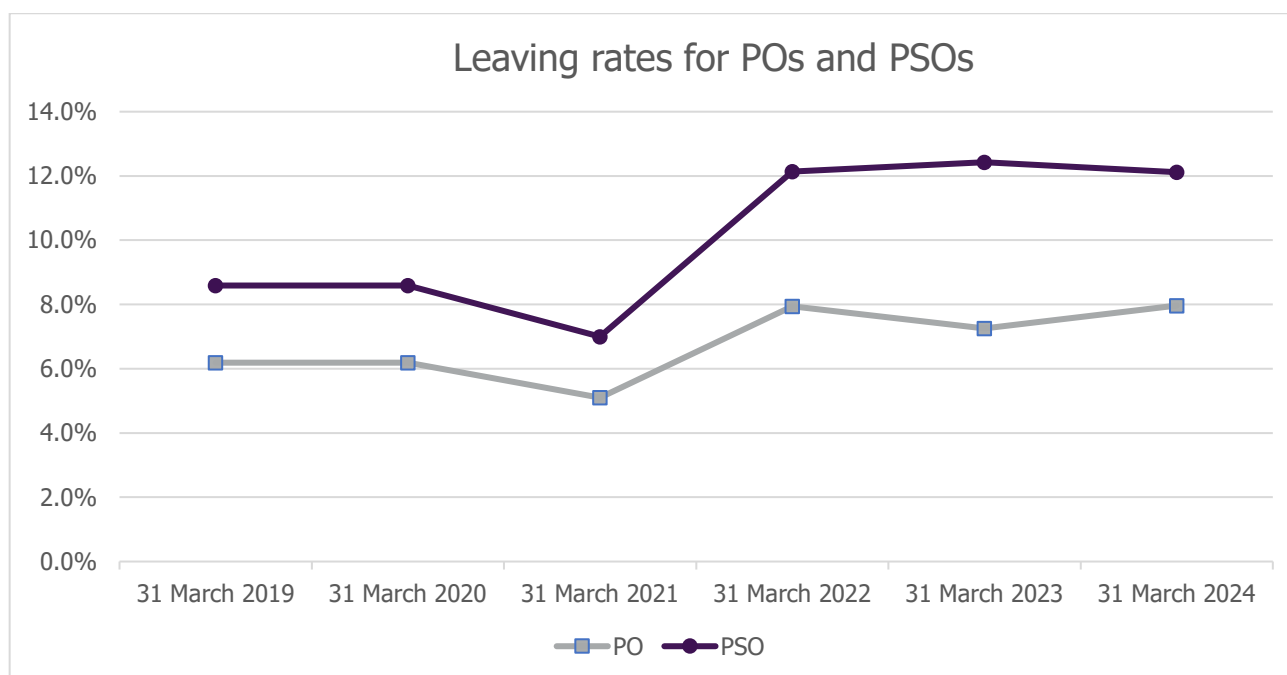


Figure 13: Leaving rates for PO and PSO staff from March 2019 to March 2024.

In the year to 30 June 2024, 175 staff left, having completed four or fewer years' service; a further 214 left, with between five and nine years' experience.

4.4. Why practitioners leave

The Probation Service reports that the primary drivers for leaving in 2023/2024 were health and wellbeing, leadership, retirement, roles and responsibilities, and ways of working.¹⁵ These themes fit broadly with the findings of our leaver interviews and staff survey, although we found that disillusionment with the nature of the work, compared with staff expectations, was a strong theme.

Analysis of our staff survey provided some key themes about how practitioners felt about their current roles.

Key messages from comments by probation professionals

The strongest messages from the frontline are that:

- workloads and caseloads are excessive
- they are feeling stressed
- they strongly believe that the pay offer undervalues their skills and the challenges of the role
- although they felt pride in their role in supporting people to change, the current strains on the service undermined the probation mission and values.

In our leaver interviews, former staff often described that they had joined the Probation Service hoping that their work would make a meaningful difference to people on probation, to support them in desisting from crime. These staff often felt that their expectations were not met within their role, as there was more focus on achieving performance targets than on providing practical help to clients. Some expressed that they also felt there was an incongruence between the values they held and those of the organisation. There was a dissonance, whereby staff were expected to support and care, but did not receive the same treatment from their employer.

Practitioners, and particularly PSOs, felt that their pay compared poorly with that for other, similar roles, particularly within local authorities, social work, and youth justice services. It is hard to gauge

¹⁵ These were provided in alphabetical order and therefore no inferences for ranking can be drawn from the exit interview data.

whether this is accurate, as probation work pay scales are national, whereas local authority rates can vary.

High workloads were felt to be a significant factor in why people leave, and staff did not always feel that their concerns were understood. Comments on this topic from our staff survey included:

“Workloads are the major reason for people leaving. I am a buddy to a PQiP who qualifies this year (and she is very good) and she is already looking for another job. She feels her family are suffering due to the pressures of the job.”

“When I express any views to other staff about feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of work, I hear ‘get used to it, this is the job’ or ‘wait until you get a full caseload, you’re lucky to have such a small caseload’”.

“I really enjoy my job. [...] I completely agree with the need for assessments, referrals and all other admin but unfortunately due to workload they take over at the moment. I would love more time to engage with persons on probation properly. Research has shown the integral part rapport plays in supporting desistance from offending. Unmanageable workloads have led me very close to leaving on many occasions and this may still be the case if things don’t improve (noted they are improving slowly which is great).”

Some regions had taken local action to try to reduce attrition; examples included introducing staff movement arrangements, whereby practitioners could express an interest in moving to other roles. The hope was that this would reduce burnout and offer development opportunities. In other areas, however, due to chronic staffing shortages, staff in sentence management roles were being prevented from moving to other roles, which caused frustration, and some felt this was pushing them to look outside of the Service for vacancies.

Some new recruits in our focus groups had taken their roles with little intention of remaining in the Probation Service; some had joined to gain a qualification (for PQiP learners) and others wanted to access vacancies in the wider Civil Service and had no particular interest in probation work.

Reward and recognition in the form of retail vouchers or small payments are available for managers to use with their staff. Some regions had review processes to understand how these were being used, but monitoring was not always paid sufficient attention. Staff had mixed views of the reward and recognition processes; those who were positive about these felt that the impact came from being thanked or praised for their work, rather than the reward it brought.

Staff often felt that they needed more professional support, and said that the services available were not effective, as those providing them did not understand the demands of the roles they were in.

4.5. Leaver interviews

The following section outlines the themes identified from our leaver interviews. Full details of our approach can be found at Annexe 2 of this report.

Choosing probation work

The most common themes for choosing to work in the Probation Service were a desire to help vulnerable people, to reduce crime and prevent future victimisation, and to understand why people act in harmful ways. Respondents told us of their idealism, in wanting to serve the community and protect people, including those who have offended. Examples of their comments are presented below.

“I wanted to work with people in the justice system and prevent victims. Help people to turn around.”

“I was brought up to believe that you should contribute to the community. So, I was idealistic but realistic at the same time, I didn’t know the detail of the gritty issues like drug abuse but I knew what went on.”

Induction and training

Those POs who went through historic versions of probation training, including CQSW, DipPS, or Probation Trust-era PQiP cohorts, were more positive about their training and early experiences.¹⁶ They cited in-depth, face-to-face training, mentors, and protected caseloads as bringing them into probation work with the right knowledge and experience. One such comment is presented below.

“Excellent. Training was face to face, most of it was in a classroom which is completely different to today’s training. Today’s is inadequate. It’s online. I don’t believe the trainees are given the space to learn properly.”

PSOs were less enthusiastic, and told us about the lack of training and simply being thrown into the work, as described in the comments below.

“As PSO, there was no training! A year after I started there was a six-week programme of things I had been doing for a year!”

“My manager was not in the office when I started as a PSO. He was on sick leave. It was kind of chaotic. I sat in front of a computer and did training. When he came back, it was a little better. There was no structure to it.”

Practitioners who had trained following the splitting of probation services into the NPS and CRCs felt that their training was inadequate, with too much online and not enough focused on casework. They said that balancing work and study was difficult, as described in the comments below.

“I did PQiP with the CRC. Not the best at the time. Going into reunification and a lot going on around what CRCs needed. Didn’t get sexual offending or high-risk training. Then went into reunification. When we unified, they expected me to be a qualified PO and manage those cases.”

“It was a weird start! They were not prepared for us turning up – there were two of us PQiPs. We were just plonked down at a desk and given some old case files to read.”

Contemporary probation work

Many respondents described their historic experiences in probation work, but we will focus here on their post-2021 experience. The main issue was excessive caseloads and workloads. Our interviewees recalled feeling stressed and anxious that they were not delivering good-quality work for their clients. Many described working long hours, and not being able to ‘switch off’ after working hours. Typical comments are presented below.

“The resources are not there to produce a good probation service. I still believe in probation values, in desistance and rehabilitation.”

“By 2022, the workload had become unmanageable. Probation runs on goodwill, like every service, and my goodwill was running out. I was working until 11 every night, and at the weekends.”

“We have a culture that those on 100% [WMT] think they are slacking. You have to be on 110% in red to take TOIL [time off in lieu] back. We had a mixed caseload before, and you could balance things out. They’re all high now and it takes a different meaning.”

Another concern was the lack of support from SPOs, and of visibility of senior leaders. Interviewees perceived that managers were mostly concerned with performance targets and ensuring that processes were complied with; there was too little support, coaching, and development for the frontline. This is illustrated by the comments below.

¹⁶ It is noted, however, that academic research relating to previous iterations of training have demonstrated frustrations about the lack of time available to spend with people on probation and excessive bureaucracy required in probation roles; see, for example, Annison et al., 2008, and Deering, 2010.

"The bureaucracy, you can't do the job without interference. It was tick-box supervision."

"Oppressive micro-management, meaningless tasks we had to spend our time on."

"Senior managers were invisible, saw them at MAPPA level 3 meetings but nowhere else. They hadn't managed a case in 15 years so were completely out of touch and needed everything explained."

"SPO asked me if it was acceptable to be out of date and I said no. I asked her if it was acceptable to be over 100% on the WMT and where the due care and consideration was."

"My team and my SPO cared about probation, but the service managers don't."

"Managers would tell me everyone is feeling the same across the service. This is what is expected now. It was horrendous, colleagues were crying in the office on a daily basis. We were angry, resentful and very bitter."

Some described bullying and harassment incidents which were not taken seriously or investigated properly. Some described a work culture that was 'toxic', created and sustained by excessive workloads. One said:

"Our caseloads were dangerously high, manager was unapproachable and bullying culture, new staff in the office were just making things worse."

There is still a CRC/NPS divide. Some former CRC staff felt that their skills and experience were demeaned by former NPS colleagues, while former NPS staff believed that former CRC colleagues were deficient in risk management work. Below are some examples of comments.

"Unification was really hard and I definitely felt looked down upon by NPS colleagues thinking I couldn't manage risk."

"[Former CRC] manager questioned why I was still assessing him as high risk of serious harm, despite a lot of concerning attitudes and behaviours, including fantasies about hurting probation officers."

Many were alarmed that experienced officers were leaving, and that too much was expected from inexperienced officers, as reflected in the comments below.

"Then people started leaving. Eventually I was the most experienced member of staff and people were coming to me for advice. When we merged, the caseloads became crazy."

"POs were leaving in significant numbers. New PQiPs being recruited but were overloaded. The majority of complex cases were coming to me as one of the most experienced in the office."

"The staff in probation are now quite inexperienced as so many have left. We've seen PQiPs leave after a few months. Officers are now very risk averse and escalate risk of serious harm and enforce too quickly. Cover your back is the ethos. It is all about risk management not rehabilitation."

Leaving the probation service

Many told of their sadness at leaving the profession; they felt pushed out by overwork and falling standards. Some interviewees had found better jobs, with better pay and prospects, most often in the public sector. There was little appetite for returning to probation work, unless there was a substantial improvement in organisational management, work culture, pay, and workloads, as reflected in the comments below.

"I work for [another department] now, and the pay is much better, and better work-life balance. [Probation] pay doesn't reflect the responsibility of a PSO, PO, or SPO. I feel like I don't deserve the job I have now because of pay and work-life balance. It's a much nicer environment."

“One good thing about being a civil servant, it has opened up job opportunities. But people move and we’re constantly losing people.”

“A job came up with [another department] and I love this job. [New department] are professional, they take work-life balance seriously, they have great learning and development opportunities. They offer a menu of professional courses to take – PRINCE [Projects IN Controlled Environments] Agile, mentoring, and so on. They are keen to see you progress and advance.”

“I had to get out. We had no support, and the support we tried to put in ourselves was taken away from us.”

“It is not safe in probation, it’s so sad, isn’t it?”

4.6. Conclusions and implications

High workloads and feeling poorly treated by their employer were key reasons for practitioners to leave. They often reported feeling disillusioned with the nature of the work, as they could not devote the time they felt appropriate to face-to-face work with people on probation, with more bureaucratic tasks taking up their time. Staff often commented that they felt their pay was poor, but this was rarely cited as the sole driver to leave, or the reason they had left. Staff who wanted to earn more felt forced to move out of practitioner roles to achieve a better salary. There is a process to gather views from staff exiting the service, but more could be done to support those at earlier stages of considering leaving, to offer help before they feel they have no choice other than to leave. Some managers expressed a sense of futility and were often unable to offer reduced workloads or better conditions.

Improving retention rates has clear links with recruitment. Attracting and selecting the right candidates, with the right skills and abilities to carry out their roles effectively, increases the potential that they will remain.

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Annexe 1: Glossary

ARMS	Active Risk Management System (ARMS) provides a framework for working with all male sexual offenders who are subject to statutory supervision. It aids the assessment of dynamic risk and protective factors (see Probation Instruction PI 15/2015).
CBF	Competency-based pay framework.
CRC	Community Rehabilitation Companies. Private sector suppliers of probation services between 2015 and 2021 as part of the <i>Transforming Rehabilitation</i> strategy.
eLearning	This refers to electronic learning that is conducted through a digital device. It may involve reading or engaging in activities, but it does not include interaction with a live facilitator. To clarify, we differentiate this method from online learning, which involves a facilitated event conducted through video-calling platforms.
HMPPS	HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS): the single agency responsible for both prisons and probation services.
Integrated offender management (IOM)	Integrated offender management brings a cross-agency response to the crime and reoffending threats faced by local communities. The most persistent and problematic offenders are identified and managed jointly by partner agencies working together.
MoJ	Ministry of Justice.
nDelius	National Delius: the approved case management system used by the NPS and CRCs in England & Wales.
NPS	National Probation Service: a single national service which came into being in June 2014 and ended in June 2021. Its role was to deliver services to courts and to manage specific groups of offenders, including those presenting a high or very high risk of serious harm and those subject to MAPPA.
OASys	Offender assessment system currently used in England & Wales by the Probation Service to measure the risks and needs of offenders under supervision.
Online learning	A facilitated event conducted through video-calling platforms.
PSR	Pre-sentence report. This refers to any report prepared for a court, whether delivered orally or in a written format.
PTA	Practice tutor assessor. This role provides the assessment component for the level 5 vocational qualification (VQ) and in some regions the level 3 VQ for PSOs.

PO	Probation officer: this is the term for a 'qualified' responsible officer who has undertaken a higher education-based course for two years. The name of the qualification and content of the training varies depending on when it was undertaken. They manage more complex cases.
PQiP	Professional Qualification in Probation, the current recognised Probation Officer qualification.
PSO	Probation services officer: this is the term for a responsible officer who was originally recruited with no qualification. They may access locally determined training to 'qualify' as a probation services officer or to build on this to qualify as a probation officer. They may manage all but the most complex cases depending on their level of training and experience. Some PSOs work within the court setting, where their duties include the writing of pre-sentence reports.
PWP	Probation workforce programme.
RM2000	RM2000 is a nationally recognised risk assessment process that uses details of an adult male offender's past sexual offending history to predict the risk of re-conviction for future sexual offending.
Skills for Justice (SFJ)	Skills for Justice, a non-profit organisation and registered charity. SFJ Awards is an independent Awarding Organisation, regulated by the UK qualifications regulators, including Ofqual, CCEA, and Qualifications Wales, to assess, quality assure, and certificate learners and employees. SFJ Awards are the awarding body for the Level 5 diploma in probation practice, the vocational element of the PQiP programme, and the level 3 vocational qualification for PSOs.
VQ	Vocational evidence-based qualifications completed in the workplace.
WMT	Workload measurement tool. An online tool used to monitor staff capacity in sentence management teams.

Annexe 2: Leaver interviews

Introduction

To inform the thematic inspection, we wanted to ascertain the experiences and views of those who had recently left the service (post-2021). We issued a call for participants on LinkedIn on 10 July 2024, and this was reposted in other social media platforms, notably Facebook groups for current and former probation staff. Former probation professionals made contact with us, and we interviewed 30 between August and October 2024.

The interviews were semi-structured, covering experiences of recruitment and induction processes, training and development, challenges experienced in the role, relationships with colleagues and managers, pre-contemplation and the final decision to leave, and inclinations about returning to probation work.

LinkedIn call for participants

Have you left probation in the last few years?

We are conducting a thematic inspection of the recruitment, retention, and training of frontline probation practitioners. As part of this work, we would like to speak to staff who have recently left these roles to understand their experiences. This is an essential element of this inspection and will help inform our findings and recommendations for improvement.

UPDATE: Many thanks to all those who have responded to our request to talk to those who have left probation recently. We have had a great response, and must now close the invite as we have enough people to interview.

The interviews were conducted by the inspection team and a senior research officer. Interviews generally lasted around one hour. Three interviews were curtailed by participants who became distressed at revisiting their experiences. Interviewers ensured that all participants were safe and knew about sources of support. We were impressed by their openness and fortitude in coming forward.

No claims of representativeness can be made from such a self-selected sample, who became aware of the opportunity from a social media post. Nevertheless, their testimony chimes with other sources of information, in particular the probation professional survey we also completed as part of this fieldwork.

Interview schedule (not all questions were posed, to allow free conversation)

Can I start by checking that that you used to work for the Probation Service?

Can you tell me about why you chose to work in probation? [Motivations / how became aware of probation / expectations on joining]

When did you join the Service?

What role were you in when you joined?

When did you leave the service?

What role were you in when you left?

Which region were you working in before you left?

What was the induction and training like? [for frontline practitioner role(s) only]

How did the job match up to your expectations?

Did you face any problems or challenges?

How well did the Service support you in the job? [learning and development, wellbeing, workload, management oversight, peer support]

Did you feel valued by the service? [line manager, senior managers, team, public, clients]

When did you start to think about leaving the service? [push/pull, level of determination to leave, second thoughts, emotions – guilt, regret, relief, dismay, optimism, hope, 'job done']

How did you make the final decision to leave?

Did you tell anyone in probation that you were thinking about leaving?

What would you say was your main driver for leaving?

- Leadership
- Pay and reward
- Career progression (lack of)
- Induction
- Learning and development
- Roles and responsibilities
- Health and wellbeing
- Environment
- Staffing
- Ways of working

Were you offered an exit interview?

What, if anything, would have persuaded you to stay in probation?

What, if anything, would persuade you to return? [Have you considered returning? / do you miss any part of the job? Are you working now (where)?]

Is there anything else you wanted to say about your time in probation?

Annexe 4: Analysis of the comments from probation professionals survey 2024

Introduction

As part of the fieldwork for this inspection, a survey was sent by email to POs, NQOs, PSOs, PQiP trainees, and SPOs in summer 2024. The target audience was around 5,700, and 1,204 responded. The quantitative results are available in a [separate spreadsheet](#) and show little positivity about various aspects of working in probation services.

This report is based on a reading of 20 per cent subsamples of the comments made in five free-text fields of the survey concerning recruitment processes, learning and development, staff retention, making probation a better place to work, and a final general comments box.

The analysis was conducted on comments made by POs, NQOs, PQiPs, and PSOs working in community sentence management and custodial offender management teams – the probation frontline. Most themes are repeated by all groups.

The comments were loaded into *NVivo*, a qualitative data analysis program, and coded, and key themes were developed.

Key messages from comments by probation professionals

The strongest messages from the frontline are that:

- (i) workloads and caseloads are excessive
- (ii) they are feeling stressed
- (iii) they strongly believe that the pay offer undervalues their skills and the challenges of the role
- (iv) although they felt pride in their role in supporting people to change, the current strains on the service undermined the probation mission and values.

Overarching themes

Recruitment processes take too long, some candidates drop out.

“Recruitment is slow with little to no communication.”

“I found the interview process really good, very well organised and the interviewers helped me to feel really relaxed. The whole process was extremely lengthy though.”

“Recruitment is slow, cumbersome, and unclear.”

Recruitment selection should value life experience and better appreciate probation experience. New recruits lack life experience, maturity, and ability to engage with people who have had difficult lives.

“The recruitment process selects people who can apply within the Success Profiles proforma, answering with STARS [Situation, Task, Action, Result] format answers. This eliminates experienced individuals with high levels of ability and a wealth of knowledge to bring to the roles.”

“In my opinion too much emphasis is put on what degree you have rather than what life experience you have. I find that the majority of people that come through PQiP have no real idea what the job entails and just how hard it is to risk assess for what people may do in the future. The majority of the work we do in trying to keep the public safe and rehabilitate offenders requires a level of understanding and maturity that comes from lived experiences and cannot be taught academically.”

"The recruitment process is a Civil Service process. It does not appropriately consider experience as part of the ability to fulfil the role, it is not exhaustive, and people are overlooked that are perfect for positions within probation. The recruitment for PQiP is particularly poor and make no sense which is why the retention is so low, it attracts a certain type of person and not the wider type of people the role needs."

"A lot of trainee officers comment that the job is not what they expected, leading them to look to leave the Service when qualified."

"We have had issues with PQiPs not being ready for the professional level of conduct we expect in our office. Some have been embroiled in issues around race relations, for example. Others have difficulty dealing with the magnitude of the work we undertake. For example, they may not be able to emotionally cope with types of people we deal with. I see people frightened to challenge people on probation which might be due to the candidate or the level of training and support they receive."

There is too little time for learning and development, too much learning and development is done online, face-to-face training is preferred for peer learning and discussion.

"Learning is all online and even in a virtual classroom you lose the benefit of professional discussion about cases. The general approach to learning is now a tick-box for performance management, with repetitive and formulaic input online."

"I don't feel like training is factored into workload. I have to give up multiple days training sometimes more than once per week and have no allowance factored into my workload for it. Further to this, when I was an NQO I lost my workload reduction allowance and was still expected to give up full days regularly for training to complete the 'NQO development' training which just made no sense and made workload more stressful."

"Training whilst training to be a PO was almost like 'protected' as a lot of it was mandatory. Now we have a mixture of optional and mandatory training. However, I get frustrated as often the mandatory stuff appears to be last minute, and you have to squeeze it in."

"Recent training was completed away from my office in a classroom for two days. That was great but I was still having to hold video calls with people on probation and a prison offender manager to community offender manager handover in my breaks to meet targets."

"Vast majority is online – either eLearning or on MS Teams. No opportunities to discuss questions with the trainers in breaks because for eLearning there is no trainer and for MS Teams training, everyone disappears on the breaks. As I am part-time, I have no real time to undertake training unless I miss targets – which is frowned upon. If, on the rare occasion, the training is in person, it will be remote from my own office, and it will not be entirely or even at all during my working hours. I am expected to attend but there is really no opportunity for TOIL, so it ends up being pay for extra time and I still have all my targets to achieve."

Probation has become a desk-bound job overburdened with admin, form filling, and performance management.

"Since qualifying, I have questioned every month, sometimes every week, whether this is the career for me due to the stress and high workload. When applying for the Probation Service, I did not realise that the job would be around 85 per cent admin/computer based and only 15 per cent working directly with people on probation. For the amount of work and tasks you have, you don't

physically have the time to spend with people on probation and complete meaningful work with them, which is the most enjoyable part of the job.”

“Too much time is spent in front of computers – people come into the job to work with people and to support people, and find that 90 per cent of the role is writing about risk. Risk assessments need to be much more concise.”

“I feel like I am just ticking boxes. Making sure I have seen people and done the referrals and reported what I need to. Someone comes in with a problem that I have to try and solve in 30 minutes so I can get to the next person. It feels impersonal and lacks that rewarding feeling of making a difference. I feel like I am undertrained and lack the knowledge that I need to help the people on my caseload.”

The pay is too low and does not reflect the challenges of the role, probation practitioners feel they are not valued.

“The pay is not reflective of the risks, time, and workload associated with the role, there are similar paid jobs in sales which include much less stress and risk.”

“I personally live pay cheque to pay cheque, having had to go through some months on foodbank vouchers or not eating in order to pay for car, fuel costs to commute to work. I work two jobs to support myself, rent, car, fuel, food cost, general cost of living has not been reflected in my pay – two years of service and I feel that I am being paid the minimum.”

“I accept HMPPS made a recent pay offer for the Probation Service, but I feel this still falls short of salaries paid in other areas (prisons, as well as other Civil Service departments).”

“No one feels valued, and expectations are unrealistic. Salary is very poor for the responsibility undertaken and the day-to-day chaotic nature of the job.”

Excessive workloads and caseloads are undermining the quality of work and creating intolerable stress and anxiety.

“The pay is not reflective of the risks, time, and workload associated with the role, there are similar paid jobs in sales which include much less stress and risk.”

“I personally live pay cheque to pay cheque, having had to go through some months on foodbank vouchers or not eating in order to pay for car, fuel costs to commute to work. I work two jobs to support myself, rent, car, fuel, food cost, general cost of living has not been reflected in my pay – two years of service and I feel that I am being paid the minimum.”

“I accept HMPPS made a recent pay offer for the Probation Service, but I feel this still falls short of salaries paid in other areas (prisons, as well as other Civil Service departments).”

“No one feels valued, and expectations are unrealistic. Salary is very poor for the responsibility undertaken and the day-to-day chaotic nature of the job.”

There needs to be more attention to staff wellbeing, and staff safety on site.

“More focus on wellbeing. Was told we were going to have a wellbeing hour where no cases were allowed in the building, this did not happen. It ended up being diluted to, if you can, try not to book cases in. We have no time for this.”

"You shouldn't be threatened with warnings or performance plans if you are genuinely unwell or have leave booked. Staff should not be punished because they are given impossible workloads."

"Probation offices do not feel safe – there is not enough work around keeping people safe. A high-risk violent offender could be released from prison, where officers are trained to handle violent aggression, to an office where we have only alarms, with no self-defence training."

There are too few multi-agency and partnership services available, especially housing and education, training, and employment.

"I love the job. I love the chance we get to make the difference to people's lives. That was my reason for joining, to make a difference. We are often like a sandwich between services though and are expected to pick up the slack for their capacity issues. In particular with local authorities and housing providers and social care teams – in particular adult social care. We do not have the capacity to implement care or provide housing, but it is us who have to face the individuals every day and apologise for the other services."

"The majority of people that work here are jaded as we are not able to provide most of the services due to lack of resources everywhere, such as housing, mental health services etc."

There is much pride in working in probation, but stress, being undervalued, and overworked detracts from that sense of pride.

"Make no mistake. I love working for the Probation Service. But it is the role I am here for. The environment is bordering on toxic."

"I enjoy the work that I do, however I feel that there isn't enough time to reflect on our practice, and there is not enough recognition for the good work that we do."

"I do love my job but at times I do find it difficult and have to remind myself why I chose this profession."

"I am proud to be a probation officer, but I see the service is being eroded by streamlining and cuts and poor quality of recruitment."

"I feel disillusioned and burnt out. I am not helping people and I don't have a sense of satisfaction in my work because I can never get anything done."

PSOs

PSOs want better progression routes.

"Make no mistake. I love working for the Probation Service. But it is the role I am here for. The environment is bordering on toxic."

"I enjoy the work that I do, however I feel that there isn't enough time to reflect on our practice, and there is not enough recognition for the good work that we do."

"I do love my job but at times I do find it difficult and have to remind myself why I chose this profession."

"I am proud to be a probation officer, but I see the service is being eroded by streamlining and cuts and poor quality of recruitment."

"I feel disillusioned and burnt out. I am not helping people and I don't have a sense of satisfaction in my work because I can never get anything done."

PSOs feel their role is undervalued, sometimes demeaned.

"I have been made to feel like an illegitimate relation to the other roles in the office."

"I have had a member of staff, a PO, in my team directly state in my presence that they are the only ones that are here carrying the whole team, even though I was sitting right there and that is the implication that because as a PSO I cannot see high or very high risk then I am virtually useless."

"I feel very negative about being a probation practitioner. I have tried to be positive, but it is very difficult. One PSO is still here from when I started, the rest have left, I have not been here a year yet. I was given so many cases straight away and was not given the time to learn. I feel I do not have time to help people and protect the public which is ultimately my role. When I have raised concerns with my manager this has never been taken seriously and I have just basically been told well it is better than it has been in the past and get on with it."

PQiP trainees

PQiPs are struggling to combine work and study.

"Nothing prepares you quite for the intensity of this programme until you are in it yourself."

"We get study days and protected learning times, but we are interrupted, and these are not respected. Most PQiPs do their university work in their own time and on weekends, which adds to stress levels and concerns about coping in the future with full caseloads."

"As I've progressed through my PQiP journey and the caseload has increased, the opportunity to set time aside for learning and development has become less and less."

PQiPs need more practice-based training in supervision skills.

"I would love more training on the supervision side of my role, access to counselling skills training would be great as would an ability to offer mental health referrals for all clients. There appears to be an understanding from the latest research of the detrimental effects of past trauma, yet this is not translated in terms of providing support to clients to address this area of their lives. Cognitive behavioural training would enable probation practitioners to assist directly. Alternatively, to be able to refer into the NHS for this service would be great."

"I never had an opportunity to shadow. I did not know how to risk manage and my first experience of seeing a person on probation was myself going in 'winging it'. I have learnt myself how to risk manage and although there is training via eLearning there's nothing to cement this learning by having support during appointments."

PQiPs find the 'cliff edge' of NQO status daunting.

"You go from nothing to everything. I don't feel like I know what I am doing and yet I have a caseload of people I'm supposed to be managing. I feel it is unfair for those individuals who might not be receiving the help they need from the service having to deal with inexperienced staff."

"As I have progressed and near the end of the final few months of my training, I am acutely aware of the lack of time I have spare to implement and cement any of my learning and development. Moreover, study days, VQ days can be disrupted due to work pressures and therefore you do not get the protected time to do what you have to do for the university."

NQOs

There is a 'cliff edge' from training to NQO working that they were unprepared for by PQiP.

"When I qualified, I felt very much out of my depth, as there were a lot of restrictions of what we could and couldn't do during PQiP."

"Qualified role feels completely different from PQiP. It does not prepare you for cases you will be given on qualifying."

"PQiP does not prepare for when you qualify. PQiPs are protected and their workload reduced so much that it is too much of a shock when people qualify and are not fully prepared for the role."

POs

POs are concerned that new entrants are unprepared for the role.

"When I qualified, I felt very much out of my depth, as there were a lot of restrictions of what we could and couldn't do during PQiP."

"Qualified role feels completely different from PQiP. It does not prepare you for cases you will be given on qualifying."

"PQiP does not prepare for when you qualify. PQiPs are protected and their workload reduced so much that it is too much of a shock when people qualify and are not fully prepared for the role."

Annexe 3: Methodology

This inspection sought to answer the following questions.

Do the policies, strategies, and arrangements for recruitment support high-quality service delivery?

- Do recruitment arrangements attract high-quality applicants?
- Does Probation Service recruitment offer benefits comparable to other, similar professions?
- Do recruitment processes select suitable candidates?
- Do recruitment processes provide candidates with a sufficiently accurate understanding of the roles they are applying for?
- Do recruitment processes support the Probation Service to achieve required staffing levels for practitioners across England and Wales?
- Do recruitment processes support the Probation Service to achieve a diverse workforce?
- Do recruitment processes provide an efficient mechanism to recruit staff?

Do policies, strategies, and arrangements for learning and development equip frontline practitioners to provide high-quality services?

- Does the PQiP programme provide candidates with sufficient knowledge and skills to practise as POs?
- Are NQOs sufficiently supported to embed their learning and gain competence as POs?
- Do training arrangements sufficiently support the continuing professional development of POs?
- Does the PSO learning pathway sufficiently equip learners to carry out their role?
- Does the training offer an appropriate balance between face-to-face, online, and eLearning to meet the needs of all learners?
- How effectively is the impact of training evaluated, and changes made in response?
- How effectively is training followed up to ensure that learning is embedded?
- Are management and peer support used effectively to support learning and development?

Do policies, strategies, and arrangements support the retention of staff?

- How effectively do policies and strategies support the Probation Service to retain frontline practitioners?
- Are the reasons why staff leave the Probation Service sufficiently recognised and understood?
- Is there sufficient activity to address the reasons why people leave the Probation Service?
- Do the results of staff surveys lead to meaningful changes that improve the working conditions of frontline practitioners?
- Are reward and recognition processes used to good effect?
- Do staff perceive the Probation Service as a good place to work which provides a safe and supportive working environment?

Fieldwork

Our fieldwork took place over six weeks, between August and October 2024. During the first five weeks, we held online focus groups, attended by randomly selected representatives from all

Probation Service regions across England and Wales. Each week focused on two or three regions as follows.

- 5 August – East Midlands and London
- 12 August – Greater Manchester, South West, and West Midlands
- 23 September – South Central, North West, and East of England
- 30 September – Kent, Surrey and Sussex, and North East
- 14 October – Wales, and Yorkshire and the Humber.

Our focus groups brought together probation practitioners who had been in similar roles for similar lengths of time, and staff in other roles linked to the recruitment, training, and retention of probation practitioners. The groups we held each week were:

- PSOs who have been at that grade for under 12 months
- PSOs at grade 1–5 years
- PSOs at grade over 5 years
- POs at grade 1–5 years
- POs at grade over 5 years
- PQiP learners
- NQOs
- PQiP SPOs
- PTAs
- Quality development officers
- Regional HRBPs
- PDU heads
- Regional training team
- Higher education institutes
- Heads of corporate services.

During our final fieldwork week, we met those responsible for recruitment, training, and retention policy and strategy at a national level.

In addition, we observed 13 learning and development events, including examples of foundational learning modules, national training events, and regional events delivered as part of PQiP induction.

Call for evidence

In an effort to understand the experiences of other public sector organisations in relation to recruitment, training, and retention, we put out the following call for evidence to:

- relevant criminal justice bodies
- local authority and third-sector bodies
- trade unions
- staff network groups in the Ministry of Justice linked to equity, diversity, and inclusion
- selected academic contacts.

CALL FOR EVIDENCE

Staff recruitment, training, and retention in the Probation Service

Dear colleague,

The Probation Service, like other public and private sector organisations, faces great challenges in recruiting, training, and retaining staff, especially frontline practitioners.

HM Inspectorate of Probation is undertaking a thematic inspection of staffing issues in the Probation Service in relation to frontline practitioners. We are keen to learn from other sectors and are asking you to share your experience and evidence on staff recruitment, training, and retention issues in your field.

Your response is welcome in any format that is convenient for your organisation. We intend to publish the names and organisations of responders in our eventual report, your contribution will be 'on the record', and we may directly quote contributions. It is important to inform us whether you are responding in a personal capacity or on behalf of an organisation.

In particular, we are keen to learn about your experience or see evidence on these questions:

1. What are the current trends and challenges in staff recruitment and retention in your sector?
2. What evidence do you seek on current staff morale and motivation, and what are the key findings? (Perhaps through staff surveys or focus groups.)
3. What is your current approach to meeting training needs and qualification requirements in your sector?
4. Please tell us about your reward and recognition policies, and other incentives, in your sector.
5. What success measures do your organisation/sector use for recruitment, training, and retention?
6. Have you noticed recent change in new entrant career expectations – for example, change in orientations to long service?
7. Please tell us your good practice examples, any innovations in recruitment, training, and retention, or anything else of interest in your sector.

Please do not feel confined to these areas, and we are keen to receive any existing papers or material you can share with us. It is not necessary to respond to all these questions. Please feel free to focus upon the issues you think are the most important, or upon which you have the most to say.

We are also keen to interview colleagues around staffing issues; please tell us if you would be prepared to be interviewed in confidence.

We received responses from the Probation Institute and Manchester Metropolitan University. We appreciated the time and thought that was put into the responses, which were valuable in increasing our understanding of the topics.

Round-table Manchester Metropolitan University Business School

We were particularly grateful to be invited to a round-table discussion on 19 September 2024 at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) which was convened in response to our call for evidence. This event provided a valuable opportunity to discuss recruitment, training, and retention

within the Probation Service and other public sector organisations. The discussion covered values-based employment, psychological safety, emotional labour, and what makes 'good employment'.

The event was attended by:

- Kevin Ball, Senior Research Officer, HM Inspectorate of Probation
- Katherine Roycroft, Impact and Engagement Manager, MMU
- Dr Sean Brophy, Senior Lecturer, MMU
- Carol Atkinson, Professor of Human Resource Management, MMU
- Julia Rouse, Professor of Decent Work and Productivity, MMU
- Dr Sarah Crozier, Reader in Occupational Psychology, MMU
- Dr Krystal Wilkinson, Reader and Associate Professor, MMU

More information about the work of MMU in relation the Good Employment Charter in Greater Manchester can be found at www.gmgoodemploymentcharter.co.uk.

Expert reference group

An expert reference group contributed to this report by advising on academic research linked to our inspection of recruitment, retention, and training. The group represented stakeholders' perspectives and commented on emerging findings and final recommendations.

Group membership included:

- Dr Sean Brophy, Senior Lecturer, Business School, MMU
- Dr Nicola Carr, Professor in Criminology, University of Nottingham
- Dr Jake Phillips, Lecturer in Criminology, Sheffield Hallam University
- Dr Matt Tidmarsh, Lecturer in Criminal Justice, University of Leeds
- Dr Philip Stiles, Associate Professor in Corporate Governance, University of Cambridge
- Professor Anne Worrall, Emeritus Professor, University of Keele
- Mandy Nightingale, His Majesty's Inspector, Ofsted
- Melanie Bowden, Assistant Portfolio Director, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services
- Sarah Hamilton, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services