



HM Inspectorate  
of Probation

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1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Manchester Civil Justice Centre,  
1 Bridge Street West, Manchester M3 3FX  
[enquiries.HMIProb@hmiprobation.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries.HMIProb@hmiprobation.gov.uk)

[www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation](http://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation)

Thursday 24 August 2023

**To:**

**Angela Cossins**, Regional Probation Director

**cc:**

**Kate White**, Inspection Single Point of Contact

**Mark Benden**, Head of Operations

**Kate Lucchesi**, Head of Operations

**Amy Rees**, Director General CEO, HMPPS

**Phil Cople**, Director General Operations, HMPPS

**Operational & System Assurance Group**, [AssuranceIntelligenceTeam@justice.gov.uk](mailto:AssuranceIntelligenceTeam@justice.gov.uk);

**Ian Blakeman**, Executive Director of Strategy, Planning and Performance,

**HMPPS**, [npsassuranceteam@justice.gov.uk](mailto:npsassuranceteam@justice.gov.uk)

**Simi O'Neill**, Head of Probation Inspection Programme

**Keith McInnis**, Lead Inspector

**Stephen Doust**, Operations Officer (Inspections)

Dear Angela,

Many thanks for the cooperation we received from you and your staff during the recent review of the Probation Service – South West region.

We have now completed the inspection of the Somerset, Dorset, and Bristol and South Gloucestershire Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) in your region and would like to take this opportunity to share with you our overall findings and our key observations and areas for improvement at a regional level.

**Regional observations:**

At a regional level, we have identified the following key strengths and areas for improvement:

**Leadership**

In June 2021, with the national unification of probation services, the South West probation region was created combining the South West National Probation Service (NPS) and services provided by the two Community Rehabilitation Companies of Bristol, Gloucestershire, Somerset, and Wiltshire (BGSW) and Devon, Dorset, and Cornwall (DDC) – both of which were, at that point, managed as part of the wider Kent, Surrey, and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company. The region is now made up of a number of business units, along with nine PDUs.

The South West region covers an enormous and varied geographic space and diverse populations, varying from the predominantly rural counties of Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall to the urban needs of Bristol. Each of these brings its own challenges, not least those of recruitment where house prices are high, such as in Dorset and Bristol. Similarly, while these PDUs experience high proportions of new and often relatively inexperienced

staff, this is in contrast to, for instance, Cornwall, with a stable but potentially less varied staff group.

Senior leaders have a clear strategic approach and now, with a relatively stable and secure senior leadership team, the opportunity to push ahead with this work. The poor quality of work to manage risk and protect the public which we found across our inspections remains a concern, and one that we also found in the last two inspections of DDC CRC (2018 and 2021) and BGSW CRC (2019 and 2021). Understanding the reasons for this, when messages appear clear from leaders and direction appears understood by staff, remains the challenge. Striking the balance between holding people accountable for their work and supporting them in doing it is one that senior leaders need now to achieve.

### **Key strengths:**

- The South West probation region has a clear strategic objective to deliver a high-quality service for all people on probation. The regional delivery plan (2023/2024) focuses on both the delivery of effective services to reduce the risk of reoffending and how it will develop its staff and set a positive and effective culture. Clear targets and objectives have been identified for the forthcoming years, which also reflect the region's link to the wider HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). The South West Reducing Reoffending Partnership and strategy also reflect the wider positive partnership arrangements in place across the region. These same objectives were also seen reflected across each of the three PDUs we visited during this inspection. In our survey of all staff up to senior probation officer (SPO) level across the region, of the 182 responses, 76 per cent said that the region prioritised quality and adherence to evidence.
- A series of six boards, including the people board and the operational delivery and change board, manage the organisational delivery of the senior leadership team, with key functions underpinning their operation and a series of task and finish groups taking forward identified objectives. The model generally works well and ensures that core business is undertaken efficiently.
- Across each of the three PDUs we inspected, partnership arrangements were identified as a key strength and this was no less the case at a regional level. In particular, these were manifested through engagement at the South West Reducing Reoffending Partnership, but also extended to include close working with the two prison group directors in the region, National Health Service, NHS Health and Justice Directorate and Office for Health Improvements, among others. The setting up of mental health treatment requirement services in the region, the development of an integrated resettlement service, and positive work with the homelessness prevention teams across the region are examples of the benefits borne of these relationships.
- Regional leaders are realistic and understand the risks faced by the service currently. Risks are monitored and reviewed monthly, with clear objectives and actions identified to bring about improvements. Nevertheless, the key risks to delivery remain, as they have since unification, of insufficient staff across the region and insufficient quality of service, and we found both of these issues in our PDU inspections.
- At the heart of concerns remains work to protect the public and to keep other people safe. At a regional level, the creation of the virtual regional hub to centralise requests for police enquiries is a positive initiative and it was encouraging to understand that children's safeguarding checks are now to be incorporated into the model, planned to be in place by September 2023.

- The key objective of the equality, diversity, inclusion, and belonging strategy is to ensure that such work runs through all aspects of service delivery. The regional strategic equality board drives this work and is charged with the delivery of the regional action plan. Currently, the board is supported by three subgroups, each focusing on a key aspect of prioritised delivery: faith and belief, race, and women. Each PDU has a generic equality lead and there are reasonable links to the national diversity leads to support work in areas where there are gaps at regional level. Overall, we saw some good examples of people with diverse needs being offered appropriate services across the three inspections we undertook. These included concentrator models to work with foreign nationals, support for those with neurodivergent needs, and effective liaison work for individuals transferring from youth justice services. We also saw some very positive work with women, especially in relation to engagement and desistance.
- Work to engage the views of people on probation is developing. The Engaging People on Probation subgroup feeds into the regional commissioning and partnership board and there appeared to be effective links with the St Giles Wise group to develop links with all PDUs. In our survey of people on probation, undertaken by User Voice, we interviewed 224 individuals. Overall, views about the service were positive, with over 80 per cent of people saying that they were able to have appointments at a time that suited them; could have conversations in private and felt safe when accessing the probation office. Over two-thirds of respondents said that they were, overall, happy with the support they received from probation services.

### **Areas for improvement:**

- Creating a unified service has been a significant challenge for senior leaders across the South West. Along with the challenges that all regions have faced with recruiting and training a frontline work force, it has also struggled to create a stable senior leadership team. At its extreme, despite three recruitment drives, the head of service in Dorset at the time of our inspection remained there on a temporary basis and was also covering a second PDU. The head of service in Bristol and South Gloucestershire had also only been in post for nine months. A second regional head of operations had only come into post in January 2023, and for 18 months post-unification the region had operated with just one, having to cover all nine PDUs. There had been delays and challenges in recruiting to other posts, and at the time of our regional fieldwork the new head of performance and quality had only just started. All of this meant that, in many respects, progression to a shared and integrated service had taken longer than in some other regions.
- Despite the challenges and variations across the region, attempts to create a single culture have been frustrated. During our inspections, we saw pockets of divided staff, either by role or geography. It remains unclear how widespread this is but, if allowed to persist, it could have an undermining effect on attempts to drive practice forward.
- Despite consistent messages to all staff and a clear regional focus on the priority of managing risk, it was disappointing that, across all three PDUs we inspected, shortfalls remained in this work. For example, at the point of initial assessment, in 59 out of 109 relevant cases across the three PDUs we inspected which required an enquiry to children's services, no such request was made, and in 35 out of 108 relevant cases no police enquiry regarding domestic abuse was made. Although in the court work we inspected, enquiries were made with the police in three-quarters

of cases and in 44 of 63 relevant cases to children's services, the information received was insufficiently analysed or used to inform the court before sentencing.

- Despite some generally positive work relating to engaging people on probation and to address offending and desistance, this lack of focus on managing risk of harm permeated all aspects of the AsPIRe (Assessment, Planning, Implementation and Reviewing) model. With variations across each PDU we inspected, less than 50 per cent of cases we inspected were sufficient in relation to the management of risk and keeping other people safe across all four of these areas of work.
- Staff we spoke to acknowledged consistently that risk and work relating to keeping other people should be their priority and middle managers similarly acknowledged the importance of such work. However, the extent to which this work is fully embedded remains a significant question and one which senior leaders need to give urgent attention to. Similarly, in our survey, only 55 per cent of respondents said that change was communicated and implemented effectively, raising questions as to how best to ensure that key messages and strategic direction are shared.
- Despite some positive work undertaken in relation to equality, diversity, inclusion, and belonging, more work was needed. In particular, although, overall, there was a good understanding of the diverse needs of the people on probation, there was little work routinely looking at disproportionality and the impact of either service provision or breach and recall on minority groups.
- While people on probation in our survey were generally fairly positive about their experience, this was not universal, with some expressing concerns about the value of, sometimes, very short interviews and their problems with travel. Only 54 per cent of respondent said that they had been asked for their views about being on probation.

## Staff

Although staffing levels across the region have increased slightly over the last 12 months, shortages continue to cause difficulties for the region to deliver effectively the service they aspire to. There are few, if any, aspects of service delivery that are not impacted, although there are, inevitably, variations across the region.

Caseloads were gradually reducing for frontline staff, although not as fast or to the extent that most would hope. The majority of staff still feel that their workloads are not manageable. Despite this, sickness levels across the region were not excessive.

As high numbers of Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) trainees are now completing their training, developing their experience and confidence to deliver effectively may well take significantly longer.

Across the region, the level of experience in teams, and with managers, varies hugely. While most staff feel that they already possess the level of knowledge, skill, and experience to manage the cases they are responsible for, and training generally is appropriate and monitored sufficiently, our review of casework would suggest that this is not reflected in the actual quality of practice. For SPOs, many of whom are also relatively inexperienced in their role and carry high workloads, it will be a serious challenge to equip them with the skills, confidence, and, more importantly, the time and space to carry out quality assurance effectively and ensure that their focus is on the management of risk of harm.

### **Key strengths:**

- While staffing across the region continues to be a challenge, we are starting to see some improvements. At the end of February 2023, the vacancy rate across the region stood at 10 per cent, with probation officer vacancies at 15 per cent and those of probation service officers standing at 27 per cent. There were no SPO vacancies. In each case, the level of vacancies was slightly lower than had been the case 12 months earlier. With the new target operating model staffing figures, this pattern has shifted somewhat, with more vacancies for probation officers and fewer for probation service officers. Nevertheless, this is a slowly improving picture, although there are some areas across the region where the level of vacancies is much worse, such as we found in both Bristol and South Gloucestershire, and Dorset PDUs.
- Senior leaders have an appropriate structure, via the people board, to monitor and manage recruitment and related workforce issues. A series of working groups reports to the board, including the strategic workforce planning board, which meets monthly, and the resource approvals committee, which sits weekly to consider all necessary applications for resource management and approvals.
- Despite high vacancy rates and the attendant pressure on staff, it was encouraging that, across the region, the average number of working days lost to sickness, sometimes an indicator of stress in a workforce, was 10, which, while higher than ideal, remains less than the national average. Similarly, for many staff, caseloads were not excessive, with 47 out of 87 staff in our surveys across the three PDUs we inspected having caseloads up to 40, as did 53 out of 94 practitioners we interviewed during fieldwork.
- At the time of the regional review fieldwork, there were 164 PQiP trainees scheduled to start throughout 2023 and 2024. This was already seeing a number of newly qualified probation officers come into post and it was anticipated that, within 12 months, the number of frontline staff should equate to the target number despite recent changes and budget restrictions within that. The region had introduced several pilot schemes to extend the range of experiences afforded to trainees, including placements in prisons as well as in the interventions team.
- Training of all staff is monitored and logged centrally. Overall, the range of training is reasonable, and 70 per cent of respondents to our survey said that they had sufficient access to in-service training. Supervision is also well embedded, and across the three PDUs we inspected, 75 out of 91 respondents said that they received supervision sufficiently frequently, and 72 out of 90 said that it enhanced the quality of their work with people on probation.

### **Key areas for improvement:**

- While senior leaders are taking positive steps to improve current vacancy rates, there remains much still to do. The increase in local recruitment and the use of recruitment fairs, such as we saw in Bristol and South Gloucestershire, have been positive initiatives, as has the use of overtime and, where appropriate, the use of agency staff (equating to three per cent of staff across the region). Despite this, many staff continued to feel considerable pressure to manage their work, with an average on the workload measurement tool for probation officers of 118 per cent of target levels, and for probation service officers of 104 per cent. Furthermore, 61 per cent of

staff in our regional survey and 51 out of 95 in interviews across the three inspected PDUs believed that their workloads were unmanageable.

- While the recruitment and training of new staff is progressing well, it often places a further burden on existing, more experienced staff who already feel overworked. Finding mentors and support staff will become even more difficult as more new staff come on board, and the level of experience of many staff in some areas is fairly limited. Given the geography of the South West, ensuring that the right staff are in the right place remains a perennial challenge to managers. Up until now, it has been possible to offer newly qualified staff completing their PQiP training their first or second choice of location, but as time goes on, this may become progressively more difficult.
- Across the region, the level of experience of frontline staff varies enormously. While many staff were very experienced, some with over 20 years' service, many were not and over a quarter of the practitioners whose cases we reviewed had joined the service only within the last two years. Despite this, across our three inspections 96 per cent of staff told us that they felt they had the necessary skills, experience, and knowledge to manage the cases we were reviewing, although this was not always evident from our findings. Many SPOs were also relatively inexperienced in their first-line management role, yet they were at the forefront of quality assurance. While most SPOs we spoke to felt suitably supported they were often enormously busy. It was disappointing that, of the 157 cases we reviewed across the three inspections, 152 required management oversight, yet in only 48 was this evaluated by inspectors as sufficient. Equipping managers to undertake this work must be central to the focus of regional leaders.

## Services and interventions

Across the South West region, the needs of people on probation are fairly well known and understood. Broadly speaking, the services available to meet these needs was in theory matched by those available, either through commissioned rehabilitative services (CRS) other support available in the community, or provided either through directly commissioned or co-commissioned provision by the probation service.

Given this, and the pressure that most practitioners told us they were under to manage their workload, it was surprising to see that, in many cases, the take-up of this service provision was lower than expected. In some cases, practitioners reported undertaking some of this work themselves. It might be the case that the provision available does not, in fact, meet the needs of people on probation, in which case it is incumbent upon the region to reassess their needs analysis. Other factors may also be at play. Practitioners are, in some cases, more focused on work to address reoffending and support desistance than on the equally important work of managing risk.

The provision of accredited programmes is progressing but, again, provision is impacted by staffing shortages, which leaves the service in a relatively precarious position. Similar pressures are evident for unpaid work, whereby across the region, significant backlogs compound the problems of delivery, as do relatively low levels of compliance and high numbers of people not completing their hours within the prescribed 12 months.

The management of resettlement and people released from custody presented a mixed picture. Structurally, the service is gradually building its staffing profile and presence in

prisons, which we saw evidence of, but the management of those on licence in the community requires further improvement.

### **Key strengths:**

- There was a good overall analysis of the needs of people on probation across the South West, based on data drawn from offender assessment system (OASys) assessment completions. This was used as the basis for both the service delivery of CRS, which are managed centrally, and commissioned/co-commissioned services managed through the regional commissioning board. The region had also produced a very helpful 'Regional Community Integration Guide' which outlined both the availability of services and provision across the region, broken down by individual PDUs, along with how they could be accessed and actual points of contact.
- Several positive projects have been co-commissioned across the region through the Outcomes and Innovations Fund, including the neurodiversity project across Somerset and Dorset, meet-at-the-gate support for released prisoners, an extended community mentoring project in Devon and Dorset, circles support (to reduce sexual offending), and a domestic abuse serial perpetrator programme (co-commissioned with the Wiltshire Police and Crime Commissioner).
- Referrals to CRS provision have been steady over the last 12 months, although demand varies considerably across PDUs. Regionally, there have been almost 8,500 referrals to services in the last 12 months, with an average of over 700 per month. Generally, demand for women's services has exceeded that anticipated, as has been the case for accommodation support, while demand for employment, training, and education, and wellbeing has been relatively low. Across the three inspections we undertook, we found that views about services varied. Commissioned services for women were viewed positively but staff were less positive about some other services, not always feeling that they provided what people on probation wanted or needed. We did not see many examples of co-location with service providers, but where it did occur there seemed to be indications that liaison and referrals were improving.
- Given the geography of the region, delivery of accredited programmes is divided into two teams. Provision is much the same across both, but this division enables a more responsive approach to the needs of PDUs, with programme staff able to attend team meetings and work with individuals to support their work with people on probation, usually to help make them 'programme ready'. The teams also deliver a duty rota to ensure that someone is available to offer court staff advice about recommendations for programmes. Despite some shortfalls in staffing compounded by issues with the ongoing national job evaluation system for programme facilitators, provision is relatively consistent, with waiting times for programmes gradually reducing over the last 12 months. Unusually, in each of our inspections, we also saw examples of practitioners delivering toolkits with people on probation.
- As with other regions we have visited, the rollout of both Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) and the wider resettlement and short-sentence models across the South West was progressing reasonably well, but was not yet functioning fully. Nevertheless, there were good relationships with the prison estate and positive attempts to ensure that an effective service was developed. Across the three PDUs we inspected, we found that community offender managers had ensured a proportionate level of contact with prisoners before release in three-quarters of relevant cases and had addressed key resettlement or desistance needs prior to

release in around two-thirds of cases. We saw some very positive examples of the homelessness prevention team working with prisoners leaving custody and offering support into accommodation.

- Despite difficulties we found with the delivery of unpaid work, in the relatively small number of stand-alone cases we reviewed (12), we were encouraged to note that in 75 per cent of cases, the implementation and delivery of services effectively supported both the person on probation's desistance and the safety of other people.

### **Key areas for improvement:**

- Of the 128 probation practitioners we interviewed in our three inspections, 90 per cent said that they had access to an appropriate range of services, either in-house or through other agencies, to meet the needs and risks of the person on probation whose case was being reviewed. This was largely reinforced in our survey of people on probation, where 78 per cent said that they were able to access services relevant to their personal needs. However, of the 157 cases we reviewed across the three PDUs we inspected, only 52 per cent (82) were deemed to have received services most likely to reduce reoffending and desistance. Some staff told us that they did not feel that CRS provision met the needs of those they were working with, or that their provision was not flexible enough. Some even told us that they preferred to deliver aspects of provision themselves.
- This was a pattern we also observed with structured interventions, delivered by the interventions teams. Despite their availability, referrals were not forthcoming and there were suggestions that some staff were preferring to engage people on probation themselves, rather than make referrals to the interventions team. Three structured interventions were available, orientated to managing emotions, managing relationships, and problem solving. However, based on figures from 07 June 2023, despite 1,839 people on probation potentially meeting the criteria, only 56 referrals were received that month, equating to just three per cent. Although some of the potential attendees might not meet the criteria, this gap remains substantial. It should be noted, however, that considerable efforts have been made to raise the profile of structured interventions, including interventions staff attending team meetings and circulating information.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of resettlement work, including OMIC, while the model is still developing is difficult. Both Dorset, and Bristol and South Gloucestershire PDUs were piloting the Probation Operation Delivery approach, to see if that provided a more consistent and effective resettlement service. Our findings were mixed. In both PDUs, we actually found that key aspects of sentence management were worse with cases on licence than those on community orders, although this was mostly post, rather than prior to, release. As more prison-based staff come on-stream, the next phase for managers is to ensure that all those staff, working both in custody and in the community, are clear about their respective roles and how they integrate.
- In unpaid work, as with some other areas of provision across the South West, there was a struggle to recruit sufficient staff to deliver an effective service. At its extreme, in Dorset, we noted that only 2.75 full-time-equivalent unpaid work supervisors were in post, against a target staffing number of 10. Across the region at the time of our inspection, of the 3,142 unpaid work requirements, 618 did not have a current unpaid work appointment and 575 were in breach. A third of cases were reaching the 12 month anniversary of their order without completing their ordered hours. Compliance was standing at an average of around 60 per cent (64



per cent in June 2023) but was lower in some PDUs. Compliance officers had been introduced in seven of the nine PDUs and were having some impact. For example, in Cornwall compliance was estimated to have risen by between five and 10 per cent since their introduction in April 2023, but there continued to be inconsistencies in the management of enforcement by practitioners. Urgent action was required to bring unpaid work up to an acceptable level and to regain the confidence of sentencers across the region.

- Overall, we saw some strengths in the work to address desistance, particularly in Somerset, and with women. Assessment in relation to reoffending and desistance needs, along with planning for it, was generally better than implementation and reviewing. This was not consistent, however, and more was needed to understand these variations.

## Information and facilities

Across all three of the PDUs we visited, and again at a regional level, we saw staff keen to deliver an effective service. Integral to this is improving the quality of both the engagement with and management of those on probation. Although plans and systems are in place, the extent to which improvement is manifest is less clear.

Systems to monitor and review practice are in place. Structures to review practice and create learning loops are also in place, as are the means for learning from external, and internal, scrutiny. The imminent launch of the 'Start it Right' initiative and the arrival of the new head of performance and quality may well give a welcome boost to galvanise the enthusiasm of staff and build on both quality and performance.

### Key strengths:

- There is a clear commitment to improving the quality of performance across the region. In particular, this is driven through the South West region quality improvement plan 2023 to 2025 and monitored through the regional performance and quality board. The plan itself identifies key lines on which it intends to focus and a structure through which progress is to be measured. Each PDU, in turn, also develops its own quality improvement plan, reflecting both the regional objectives and its own means for reviewing and measuring progress. An example of this is the principle of 'Start it Right', emphasising the importance of ensuring casework focuses on the early stages of orders, as the best means of ensuring that subsequent stages 'Do it Right' and 'End it Right' can hope to be successful. We saw examples across the PDUs we visited of local quality improvement plans in place, although their implementation was more variable. Both the regional risk register and business plan recognise that the quality of performance requires improvement.
- Each PDU is allocated its own performance and quality officer, although it is a proportion of a person given there are eight for the region and nine PDUs. The model was working reasonably well and PDUs we visited spoke positively of the support they received.
- Information is widely shared with staff through both newsletters and regular, usually monthly, all-staff calls. Messaging is clear, although the extent to which it is taken on board by staff is open to question.
- The relatively recent roll-out of protected learning days, usually centred on key learning, often identified through audit and other quality assessments, including Serious Further Offences (SFOs), is a positive initiative. In some PDUs, however, the model has been adopted only recently and it is too early to determine its benefits.

Similarly, the South West was an early adopter of the practitioner dashboard, a mechanism allowing staff to identify their own priorities and targets, and to manage their time effectively. Most staff we spoke to, as well as managers, felt that the model was a positive addition. In Dorset, 61 per cent of staff had already accessed the system.

- The South West region had identified a specific audit and inspection lead manager, whose role it was to drive progress against identified objectives drawn from, primarily, external scrutiny. Progress was monitored quarterly through the performance and quality board. It was a useful mechanism to ensure that learning was built into subsequent practice.
- In March 2023, a useful review was undertaken of the roles and responsibilities of all senior managers across the South West. This included both regional and national roles, where appropriate, and ensured that all staff were aware of the most appropriate person when seeking advice or guidance.
- Policies and procedures were reviewed and monitored regularly via the regional operational and delivery board. Usefully, trackers were maintained to identify management responsibility and ensure compliance.

### **Key areas for improvement:**

- Despite the range of communications across the region, messages around many aspects of performance and practice are still not being taken on consistently by frontline staff. Many staff told us that they often felt overwhelmed by the amount of information, updates, and messages they received and had, in some cases 'switched off'. Others also told us that they sometimes struggled to attend regional events because of their workloads.
- While risk assessment and its incorporation into risk management plans are at the heart of the regional and, by extension, PDU quality development plans (and links from this include learning from SFOs), this was not playing out in terms of learning. Some of the key themes identified by the SFO team between October 2020 and March 2022 continued to be found in our case reviews, including inaccurate and insufficient risk assessments, lack of professional curiosity, case recording deficits, and insufficient domestic abuse practice.
- It was not always clear how the balance was struck between quality and performance or between performance and effectiveness. Similarly, variations across PDUs in the region were not always understood or built into planned activity. There was a target for all staff to be subject to an annual regional case audit tool (RCAT) review and for this to be built into ongoing training and development either individually or via protected development days. While useful, further quality assurance was usually required, and fell invariably to SPOs, many of whom were relatively new in post and most of whom had significant workloads. A dedicated focus and further support for this group of staff would likely prove beneficial across the region.

### **Statutory victim work**

We looked at 13 statutory victim cases, although only seven took up the offer of contact with the service. We also interviewed the strategic lead for victims work in the South West region. We reviewed case records, to look at whether initial contact with victims encourages engagement with the victim contact scheme, whether information and communication

exchange supports the safety of victims, and if pre-release contact allows victims to make appropriate contributions to the conditions of release.

### **Key strengths:**

- At our last inspection of the South West region in 2021, we described statutory victim work as delivering 'a high-quality service to victims' across the South West. This remains the case and reflects what we found on this occasion.
- The victim liaison team sits under the leadership of the head of public protection, which works well and ensures that learning from developments relating to public protection is incorporated appropriately into their wider role. The team incorporates two SPOs and administrative support, with the role of victim liaison officer (VLO) undertaken by a team of probation service officers. Caseloads currently sit at around 180, which is regarded as manageable.
- While the team is a regional one, VLOs are allocated broadly to areas across the region. This enables closer liaison, support, and guidance to and from PDUs and practitioners within them with responsibility for cases meeting the requirement for statutory victim contact.
- We saw examples of appropriate and sensitive attempts to establish contact with victims and to follow this up with a variety of approaches, including text messages and emails when initial contacts were not responded to. We also saw good examples of liaison between VLOs and victims in the run-up to parole and release planning, and this being used to inform release planning, including exclusion zones and non-contact orders.

### **Key areas for improvement:**

- Although there had been some difficulties with maintaining the full complement of staff, at the time of the inspection the team was fully staffed. It was anticipated that this would increase under the target staffing levels recently published.

### **Learning from SFO investigations**

At the time of the inspection, there was a temporary head of strategy and assurance on secondment to the South West, covering both the SFO service and the wider performance and quality function. The new head of performance and quality started during the week of our regional fieldwork. The SFO team includes five reviewing officers, with a further one acting up as a band six manager, leaving the team operating with a vacancy. Nonetheless, the team's workload was described as 'manageable'.

There was a strong commitment from the SFO team to their work and to ensuring that learning was built on their findings. Nevertheless, some staff were relatively new in post and learning from more experienced colleague was an integral part of their approach. At the time of the inspection, due to the performance and quality vacancy, the band six manager was undertaking both internal quality assurance and signing off reviews. While this was outside the normal practice, it had been agreed by both the regional probation director and centrally, and was likely to stay in place until the new lead manager was able to take over the role. As they were from a non-probation background, it was anticipated this would be after a period of acclimatisation.

Of the 22 reviews completed between April 2022 and April 2023, 50 per cent achieved either a 'Good' or 'Outstanding' rating. The other half were rated as 'Requires improvement'. The

team acknowledged that there is work to do in respect of improving their ratings but were open to feedback and considering ways of improving their reviews. Themes highlighted in SFO reviews were largely consistent with findings in other regions, as well as some key headlines from our own independent reviews.

Reviewing managers were allocated to specific PDUs, to build relationships and develop confidence in staff to facilitate wider learning from reviews. Reviewing managers also took lead in thematic areas such as women, in order to liaise with staff in concentrator roles. Given the repeated nature of many findings, this approach seemed appropriate. The team was also drawing on a database, collated by the North East probation region, of learning from internal HMPPS audits, HM Inspectorate of Probation, and RCAT as a means of incorporating learning and building on guidance to practitioners. The team had good links with both the senior leader team, with whom they met monthly, and public protection staff and the victim contact service.

The publication of the Bendall review in January 2023 had a significant impact on the region, given its involvement with the case. There were real efforts being made to engage with PDUs to alleviate anxieties regarding the SFO process and outcomes. This, along with regular contact with senior leaders, already appeared to have had a positive impact, although more effort is still needed, along with work to embed learning.

## Summary

In our PDU inspections, we rated Somerset, and Bristol and South Gloucestershire as 'Requires improvement' and Dorset as 'Inadequate'.

Across all three PDUs we inspected, and at a regional level, we saw many examples of effective work, positive partnerships, and innovation. However, although staff were hard-working and committed, we consistently found deficits in casework practice, , especially in relation to managing risk and keeping other people safe. Staffing levels are improving across the region, albeit slowly, and the senior leadership of the region is now close to its designed complement. It is now at something of a tipping point. Understanding what holds frontline staff back from focusing, as a priority, on managing risk must be a priority. Ensuring that those responsible for quality assurance are given the necessary time and skills is of equal importance. It is, ultimately, for senior leaders to support this work and ensure that it is taken forward.

Our recommendations from the inspected PDUs are set out in Annexe one. I look forward to receiving your regional action plan in due course, outlining how you will implement our recommendations. I wish you and all your staff well in undertaking this work.

Yours sincerely



**Justin Russell**

Chief Inspector of Probation

## **Annexe one – Recommendations –**

**please note, these have been included from Somerset, Dorset and Bristol and South Gloucestershire. However, we have not yet received factual accuracies from all three yet and so may be subject to change.**

Set out below are the recommendations arising from the inspection of PDUs in this region.

### **Somerset PDU should:**

- improve the quality and impact of work in relation to risk of harm across court work and sentence management
- develop practitioner's confidence and skills in the use of professional curiosity to identify, analyse, assess, plan, and respond to indicators of risk effectively
- ensure all available information relating to safeguarding and domestic abuse is accessed and utilised, and all relevant partners are engaged in keeping children and victims safe
- develop and implement a stronger offer to engage the voice of people on probation
- work with Somerset children's social care services to improve information sharing, joint planning and collaborative working to protect children from the harm caused by domestic abuse.

### **South West region should:**

- work with Avon and Somerset Constabulary to improve the quality of police information sharing required to inform court and case management risk assessment and planning
- support the development of the growing number of Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) and newly qualified officers expected
- sufficiently resource court staff across Somerset to enable quality assurance processes to be fully embedded to support court staff development and improve the quality of advice provided to court
- support the PDU to develop a consistent, structured and well-managed staff induction process for all new joiners, with timely access to relevant entry-level training, shadowing opportunities and mentoring.

### **HM Prison and Probation Service should:**

- ensure the national learning and development arrangements provide staff with the necessary support to understand how to effectively keep people safe
- ensure regions and PDUs have sufficient workload capacity to undertake the required standard to protect the public.

**Dorset PDU should:**

- ensure all MAPPA nominals are identified and level setting for custody and community cases is timely, taking into consideration the earliest possible date of release and any temporary releases, and are fully informed by information from all relevant agencies in all cases
- ensure all risk information relating to MAPPA nominals is shared with the Department of Work and Pensions via the MAPPA notification process, in a timely manner
- improve the quality of work to assess, plan, manage and review risk of harm
- ensure information relating to domestic abuse history is sufficiently analysed to support the management of risk of harm to others
- ensure information relating to child safeguarding is routinely obtained and used to ensure risks to children are understood and safety arrangements are in place
- provide additional support and training to middle managers to improve their confidence, independent decision making and leadership skills
- ensure managers are providing effective, individualised management oversight, focussing on the quality of work relating to risk of harm
- ensure that the interventions necessary to improve desistance and reduce reoffending and risk of harm are provided in all cases.

**South West region should:**

- prioritise the recruitment of a permanent head of PDU
- ensure senior regional management support and visibility until a permanent head of PDU is appointed
- ensure UPW requirements start promptly and that there are sufficient UPW placements and supervisors to deliver the orders of the court
- ensure the recruitment of an additional Horizon programme facilitator.

**HM Prison and Probation Service should:**

- consider providing ongoing Effective Practice Service Improvement Group (EPSIG) place-based support within the PDU.

**Bristol and South Gloucestershire PDU should:**

- improve the quality of work to assess, plan for, manage and review casework to ensure the safety of others
- Ensure that processes by which to obtain domestic abuse and child safeguarding information is clear and that responses contain sufficient detail to support the assessment, planning and management of risk of harm to others
- improve quality assurance and management oversight arrangements of all casework, ensuring practitioners apply professional curiosity
- ensure that interventions necessary to improve desistance and reduce reoffending and risk of harm are provided in all cases
- provide the necessary training and learning opportunities to support practitioners to apply professional curiosity
- ensure appropriate management information is available to analyse and consider any potential disproportionality in the quality of service delivery to people on probation from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and other protected characteristics

**South West region should:**

- ensure that Bristol and South Gloucestershire PDU has sufficient staffing resources in place

**HM Prison and Probation service should:**

- Improve the vetting timescales for the recruitment of staff
- review contract arrangements for Commissioned Rehabilitation Services (CRS) accommodation services to ensure that these meet the needs of people on probation

## Annexe two – PDU ratings

Set out below are the ratings of the PDUs in this region. [More detail about the reasons for the ratings is available in the PDU reports, which are published on our website.](#)

### Somerset PDU

Fieldwork started June 2023

Score **8/27**

#### Overall rating

Requires improvement



#### 1. Organisational delivery

1.1 Leadership

Requires improvement



1.2 Staff

Requires improvement



1.3 Services

Good



1.4 Information and facilities

Good



#### 2. Court work and case supervision

2.1 Court work

Inadequate



2.2 Assessment

Inadequate



2.3 Planning

Inadequate



2.4 Implementation and delivery

Requires improvement



2.5 Reviewing

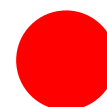
Requires improvement





**Dorset PDU**

Fieldwork started June 2023

Score **3/27****Overall rating****Inadequate****1. Organisational delivery**

1.1 Leadership

Inadequate



1.2 Staff

Requires improvement



1.3 Services

Inadequate



1.4 Information and facilities

Requires improvement

**2. Court work and case supervision**

2.1 Court work

Requires improvement



2.2 Assessment

Inadequate



2.3 Planning

Inadequate



2.4 Implementation and delivery

Inadequate



2.5 Reviewing

Inadequate



**Bristol and South Gloucestershire PDU**

Fieldwork started June 2023

Score **6/27****Overall rating****Requires improvement****1. Organisational delivery**

1.1 Leadership

Requires improvement



1.2 Staff

Requires improvement



1.3 Services

Requires improvement



1.4 Information and facilities

Good

**2. Court work and case supervision**

2.1 Court work

Inadequate



2.2 Assessment

Inadequate



2.3 Planning

Requires improvement



2.4 Implementation and delivery

Inadequate



2.5 Reviewing

Inadequate

