



Her Majesty's
Inspectorate of
Probation

An inspection of probation services in:
Essex North PDU, East of England region
The Probation Service

HM Inspectorate of Probation, May 2022

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We inspect these services and publish inspection reports. We highlight good and poor practice and use our data and information to encourage high-quality services. We are independent of government and speak independently.

Please note that throughout the report the names in the practice examples have been changed to protect the individual's identity.

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Foreword

This is the fifth Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) inspection under our new programme of inspections and the third to be conducted in England. Our new programme of work visits newly formed probation regions and PDUs following the unification of Community Rehabilitation Companies and the National Probation Service into The Probation Service in June 2021. Our methodology now incorporates a direct link between our findings for the leadership and management of the service and what we find in the inspection of cases; the ratings for case supervision directly impact on the ratings we award for leadership.

Case samples for this inspection were taken from August and September 2021, so within the early months of the new unified organisation and operating model. The Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in exceptional delivery model arrangements being put in place across England and Wales, has also significantly impacted how probation services are delivered.

Our ratings for the quality of case supervision were inadequate across the board, with fewer than half the cases we inspected being satisfactory against our quality standards. Staffing challenges for Essex North PDU, are a key issue and have hampered the delivery of sound probation practice. However, we also found a lack of understanding amongst staff about what it was they should be prioritising in these challenging circumstances.

HM Inspectorate of Probation have commented on the challenges of recruitment in the East of England for many years. Indeed, I previously noted that "This division has significant staff shortages. This is a long-standing issue, exacerbated by its close proximity to London...this should be a recruitment priority for the Ministry of Justice" (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2019). In an area with low unemployment, and a range of competitive employment options, there is little to indicate that vacancies, across PSO and administrative grades in particular, are going to be filled quickly. Current recruitment processes are lengthy, including significant delays for security vetting. In addition, Ministry of Justice budgetary rules provide little flexibility or innovation in addressing recruitment and retention issues. Faced with these recurring challenges, HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) must address these issues effectively to ensure adequate staffing in future.

This PDU's leaders need to communicate more clearly what they expect staff to deliver under the national 'prioritising probation' plans. This needs to be better understood across the PDU, with monitoring and accountability by managers to ensure key activities are completed. While people talked about the need to prioritise 'risk' in their practice, there was no shared understanding of what this actually meant. In our inspection of case activity, it was the quality of work in relation to our standards around keeping people safe that our assessments found most inadequate.

Tasks such as safeguarding checks with local authorities, and domestic abuse checks with the police were all too often being missed. Where they were taking place, they were often not being followed up if information was not returned. Where this information was returned, there was limited analysis of what it meant for assessment of risk levels and management of the case.

There are examples of innovative multi-agency projects in Essex North PDU that are worthy of note. The Violence and Vulnerability Unit shows promise as one of just 18 similar projects running across England and Wales. The community sentence treatment requirement is also being well utilised to support specific needs of

individuals across the PDU with mental health or drug or alcohol problems. However, before the PDU commits further resource to these and other projects, it should focus on getting the basics of managing the cases of people on probation right first.

Feedback from people on probation as part of this inspection was largely positive, and practitioners spoke of a desire to meet their needs as being the motivation for their work. While this is commendable, the reality is that little offence-focused work is being delivered and staff are currently unable to focus and prioritise the delivery of key probation work.

Essex North PDU is rated as 'Inadequate' overall as a result of both poor operational and organisational delivery. Undoubtedly the PDU managers and practitioners will be disappointed with our findings and I understand and appreciate that they are having to deliver in very challenging circumstances. Urgent support is needed to enable them to make the significant improvements that are needed.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Justin Russell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Justin Russell
Chief Inspector of Probation

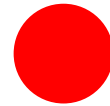
Ratings

Essex North PDU

Score **1/27**

Overall rating

Inadequate



1. Organisational delivery

1.1 Leadership

Inadequate



1.2 Staff

Inadequate



1.3 Services

Inadequate



1.4 Information and facilities

Requires improvement



2. Court work and case supervision

2.1 Court work

Inadequate



2.2 Assessment

Inadequate



2.3 Planning

Inadequate



2.4 Implementation and delivery

Inadequate



2.5 Reviewing

Inadequate



Recommendations

As a result of our inspection findings we have made a number of recommendations that we believe, if implemented, will have a positive impact on the quality of probation services.¹

Essex North PDU should:

1. ensure priorities are clearly communicated and understood by probation practitioners and middle managers
2. ensure all new senior probation officers receive the appropriate support and training to enable them to manage their teams and caseloads effectively
3. ensure pre-sentence domestic abuse and safeguarding checks are completed and utilised to inform assessment, planning and risk management
4. ensure all administrative staff receive the training they need in order to complete the full range of duties following unification.

The Probation Service – East of England region should:

5. support senior and middle managers to manage and prioritise both their individual, and their team workloads across the PDU
6. prioritise quality assurance of current case supervision.

HMPPS should:

7. in conjunction with the region, review the provision of services delivered by commissioned rehabilitation services (CRS) providers by ensuring CRS providers are adequately resourced for the volume of referrals being made
8. support East of England region to recruit and retain staff
9. expedite the vetting of staff as a matter of urgency.

¹ Progress against previous inspection recommendations for the relevant CRC or NPS Division are included in annexe one

Background

We conducted fieldwork in Essex North PDU over week commencing 21 March 2022. We inspected 65 cases where sentences and licences had commenced between August and September 2021. We also conducted 57 interviews with probation practitioners.

Essex North PDU is one of eight PDUs within the East of England probation region, the others being Essex South, Norfolk, Suffolk, Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire. Essex North PDU covers one tier 1 local authority (Essex) and eight tier 2 local authorities – Harlow, Colchester, Chelmsford, Epping, Maldon, Uttlesford, Tendring and Braintree. It is policed by Essex Police and has mixed urban and rural communities. It also includes one public sector prison – HM Prison Chelmsford.

The total target staffing for Essex North is 177.5 full-time equivalent posts. As of 4 March 2022, East of England probation region had a total caseload of 20,889 including 11,337 individuals under supervision in the community, 5,028 subject to supervision on licence and a further 4,524 cases subject to pre-release supervision. Essex North PDU's total caseload was 2,644 at the time the inspection was announced, made up of 1,791 individuals supervised in the community and 853 post-release cases.

The head of Essex North PDU holds the regional lead for diversity and Essex North PDU has a variety of partnership arrangements including, but not limited to:

- Essex Criminal Justice Board
- Essex Reducing Reoffending Board
- Eight Community Safety Partnerships – Harlow, Colchester, Chelmsford, Epping, Maldon, Uttlesford, Tendring, and Braintree.
- Mid Essex Gangs Forum
- Essex Violence & Vulnerability Unit; member of the strategic board.

Since the point of unification, HMPPS has commissioned services to be delivered locally through Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) providers to support the resettlement and rehabilitation of people on probation.

For Essex North PDU these include:

- personal wellbeing services provided by The Forward Trust
- women's services provided by Advance
- accommodation services provided by Seetec/Interventions Alliance
- education, training and employment provided by Seetec/Interventions Alliance.

The case sample drawn for this inspection partly covered a period when Essex North PDU was still operating under an exceptional delivery model (EDM), thus restricting the amount of contact offered to people on probation, particularly face to face. The EDMs were in place following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic which required The Probation Service to deliver services in accordance with public health and government guidance. This also impacted on the delivery of both unpaid work and accredited programmes.

1. Organisational delivery

Across the domain two case supervision standards – assessment, planning, implementation and delivery, and reviews – the quality of work we inspected was sufficient in less than half of the cases we inspected resulting in ratings of ‘inadequate’ for each of these standards. Staff report that they do not know what to focus on in their busy workloads and as a result seem unable to prioritise the things that really matter. While there is an expressed desire by most practitioners to focus on risk, this does not routinely appear to be happening in practice – evident by the fact that the risk of harm scores were the weakest element of our inspected cases.

Vacancies at the senior probation officer (SPO) grade had recently been filled, but this left a number of very new staff who were trying to adjust to their new roles. The benefits of the recruitment of this group will take time to impact on the performance and quality of work. In other grades, there remain high vacancy levels which are clearly significantly impacting the delivery of services. While we did see low levels of morale and high levels of frustration among some staff, there remained a determination to do the right thing by those subject to probation supervision. However, this determination often did not equate to high-quality delivery of services.

The Probation Service’s workload management tool (WMT) provides a relatively blunt tool to understand the full dynamics of individual workload. However, WMT data, together with staff accounts, make it clear that workloads are too high and impacting on the quality of what is being delivered. Staff have the necessary physical equipment but not the time to deliver work within the challenging situation that Essex North PDU finds itself in.

Probation practitioners and middle managers are impacted by the shortage of staff and therefore are not enabled to do a good enough job in most cases. Probation practitioners are not always managing cases that they have the skills to manage, and probation officers (POs) are holding cases that in normal circumstances would be allocated to PSO staff.

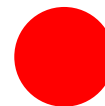
Strengths:

- There is a desire for innovation and improvements going forward from the PDU head and an openness to receive ideas from staff. Unfortunately, due to workloads, staff have not been able to engage in this vision and innovation, as they ‘can’t see the wood for the trees’.
- Engagement sessions have been held with staff to canvas views on the PDU and how staff think things could change. After a poor response initially, these meetings are gaining some traction.

Areas for improvement:

- The stated regional vision and strategy needs to be clearly communicated as it is not understood by the majority of staff.
- Prioritising probation plans need to be utilised and monitored by managers and staff to drive workload priorities.
- There are insufficient staff across sentence management functions, with high vacancy rates in the probation service officer (PSO) and administrative staff groups in particular.
- The arrangements for key aspects of delivery, specifically the exchange of risk and safeguarding information, are not working as effectively as they need to in order to effectively promote desistance and protect the public.
- Commissioned rehabilitation services (CRS) for accommodation are oversubscribed, resulting in backlogs and delay in individuals accessing necessary services.
- There is limited use of structured interventions and toolkits to prevent reoffending and to support desistance, which together with the limitations of the CRS provision means little offence-focused work is delivered.

1.1. Leadership



The leadership of the PDU enables delivery of a high quality, personalised and responsive service for all people on probation.

Inadequate

In making a judgement about leadership, we take into account the answers to the three questions below together with the results of our review of cases against the domain two standards. A key element of leadership is the ability to deliver results in practice. We therefore apply a rule which means that if the results from each area of the domain two standard are rated as inadequate or requires improvement then the rating against the leadership standard can only be rated inadequate or requires improvement. The results from each area of domain two standards were rated 'Inadequate'; this alongside the performance against domain one standards, has resulted in an overall rating for leadership of 'Inadequate'.

Do the vision and strategy of the PDU leadership team drive effectively the delivery of high-quality services for all people on probation?

Staff at middle manager and probation practitioner level had little understanding of what the vision for the region or PDU was. There was a lack of clear understanding of the national prioritising probation framework and how this should be driving work activity in practice in a challenging working environment.

There is evidence that being able to suggest positive changes to contribute to improving services is a feature of the culture within Essex North PDU and actively promoted. However, in reality, staff are so busy being reactive in their work that this is rarely happening. That said, in our probation practitioner survey, 62 per cent

(24 out of 39) respondents indicated that the organisation promoted openness, constructive challenge and ideas.

Middle managers appear to be working in a reactive manner on a day-to-day basis, that some described as 'firefighting', rather than any sense of being able to plan and drive improvements for the future. As they are not clear on the priorities, there is not a sufficiently planned approach to their work, and they are not working collaboratively or strategically as well as they could be. This filters down to probation practitioners who are doing what they can day to day, dictated by caseload activity. This negatively impacts on overall service delivery, reflected in the management of cases.

Are potential risks to service delivery anticipated and planned for in advance?

The most recent regional risk register review dated January 2022 focuses on 12 risks, the most significant being the impact of staff vacancies on their ability to deliver the Target Operating Model (TOM) and an inability to fully utilise commissioning budgets due to 'inflexible and slow' commissioning processes, resulting in an underspend of commissioning budgets and the regional innovation fund. Other key risks include the inability to deal with unpaid work and accredited programme backlogs and an inability to deliver resettlement provision. Staff shortages are a real threat to implementing the TOM and the full picture around target and actual staffing is not yet fully understood. The revised workforce planning tool is recognised as critical to understanding the staffing picture. Measures are in place to mitigate risks regionally, with an option to escalate to national workstreams where appropriate.

Staffing issues across the PDU are an active and continued risk to service delivery, that predates unification. HM Inspectorate of Probation have commented over a period of years on the recruitment challenges faced in the East of England. In a report on the then National Probation Service (NPS) in the Eastern Region, the chief inspector said, "This division has significant staff shortages. This is a long-standing issue in the division, exacerbated by its close proximity to London...this should be a recruitment priority for the Ministry of Justice" (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2019)².

Without a concentrated effort and focus, it is unlikely that, this is likely to change in the future, in what is an area of low unemployment. This impacts significantly on the ability of the PDU to deliver probation services, and the restrictions and lack of flexibility in how regions utilise their budgets, prevents them being able to provide innovative solutions to address these issues.

Ongoing recruitment challenges significantly add to the operational risk to probation service delivery and, most importantly, to how the PDU keeps people safe. Delays in recruitment processes add further challenges, and the time from date of appointment to being able to commence employment is a significant barrier. Staff reported that while there had been some improvements recently, there were still occasions when vetting took several months, and applicants had dropped out of the process as a result. Domain two cases inspected commenced in a period of significant vacancies within the SPO group. In the weeks before the inspection

² HM Inspectorate of Probation (2019), *An inspection of South East & Eastern Division*, National Probation Service, September 2019.

fieldwork, these vacancies had been filled. A full complement of SPOs should be able to drive some of the improvements needed but it will clearly take time for them to embed into their new roles. And, as a number of POs had been promoted to the SPO roles, this has moved the recruitment issue to PO grades. This is in addition to the challenges within the PSO and administrative roles that already exist.

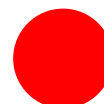
In our meetings with staff we were regularly told about large numbers of staff leaving; however, this was not borne out by the PDU's attrition rates (11.9 per cent across all staff groups compared to a slightly lower regional figure of 11 per cent).

Does the PDU ensure the delivery model meets effectively the needs of all people on probation?

Practitioners and middle managers were not clear about national prioritising probation plans, and as a result were struggling to know, when faced with competing pressures, what to prioritise first. There was an expectation by leaders that these plans had been put into place, but in reality, there was little demonstrated understanding of them by staff. It was not possible to establish whether the plans had not been communicated or if staff dealing with busy workloads were not able to understand how the plans impacted on their day-to-day work. Some said that they felt that priorities changed regularly to the point that they never knew quite what their focus should be on. Some identified that 'risk' was their priority yet, when questioned further, could not explain what they meant by this and the management of risk of harm was the weakest area within domain two results. PDU staff lacked clarity of what they were individually responsible and accountable for delivering.

User Voice councils have been established in Essex, to canvas the views of people on probation.

1.2. Staff



Staff are enabled to deliver a high-quality, personalised and responsive service for all people on probation.

Inadequate

In making a judgement about staffing, we take into account the answers to the four questions below. A key element of staffing is whether staff within the PDU are empowered to deliver a high-quality, personalised and responsive service for all people on probation. For Essex North PDU, we have assessed this not to be the case which has resulted in a rating for staffing of 'Inadequate'.

Do staffing and workload levels support the delivery of a high-quality service for all people on probation?

Essex North PDU is under-resourced. Staffing of sentence management functions was 25 per cent down on the anticipated staffing numbers as of 31 December 2021. At that same point the SPO vacancy rate within sentence management was at 61 per cent; however, these posts have since been filled. Of most concern is the PSO role, with data from the end of 2021 showing a 58 per cent vacancy rate for this group, and little having changed since then. As a result, the post-unification ambition of blended caseloads of higher and lower risk cases for probation practitioners is not yet possible. We found some staff who were ill-equipped to manage the cases they had. Furthermore, in some instances where POs were holding PSO-level cases, medium- and lower-risk cases were almost ignored, with probation practitioners describing an inability to work on them when their focus was needed on higher-risk cases.

Senior managers from the PDU meet regularly with the human resources business partner for the purposes of workforce planning; however, there appears to be significant limitations in the impact they can have at PDU level, given the local recruitment situation. There is a reliance on agency staff for nine per cent of the PO staff group, slightly higher than the overall regional comparator of eight per cent. Despite a significant underspend in terms of staffing budgets, at both a PDU and regional level, there is a lack of flexibility to enable this budget to be used creatively to fill staffing gaps.

We have commented on staffing in the East of England region over many years, including in 2019 in our [inspection report for South East & Eastern National Probation Service](#).³ Without something changing in this area, there seems limited prospect of things improving in the future. Staff described vetting as being problematic in terms of delays in the recruitment process and gave examples of where potential candidates had secured alternative employment elsewhere given the time it took to start.

In HM Inspectorate of Probation's practitioner survey, all 37 responses replied either that staffing levels were either 'not at all' or 'not that' sufficient. Of the probation practitioners we questioned, 87 per cent said their workload was not manageable.

This probation practitioner was typical when they said:

"I am missing things on cases due to my high caseload and not knowing what to prioritise."

This is indicative of not only staff struggling with workload, but also a lack of understanding of what should take priority.

Probation practitioners are consistently working above 120 per cent on the WMT across all offices. At the end of December 2021 POs averaged 139 per cent on the WMT, while PSOs were at 123 per cent. Of the staff we interviewed, 28 per cent said they had 61 or more cases. However, these figures do not sufficiently account for activity designed to reduce the impact of caseloads of staff, such as reduced or telephone reporting – the practical impact of which is not clear.

Mixed caseloads are yet to be realised and many cases remain inappropriately allocated. This results in POs holding what would otherwise be PSO cases, and

³ See footnote 2.

little work being undertaken as their focus is on higher-risk cases. In contrast, we found low-risk stand-alone unpaid work orders, where there was excessive contact between probation practitioners and people on probation, not proportionate to risk and need levels.

Staff also talked about a variety of roles, in which they are asked to act as single points of contacts (SPOC) for a variety of different PDU- and regionally led activity. They described this taking time out of their working day that they could ill-afford. SPOC roles have the potential to provide some efficiencies; however, staff need to fully understand this and know how and what they should prioritise in their work.

There are not enough administrative staff. Regular attempts are made to secure temporary staff; however, this has not been sustainable, with either no available agency staff or staff that do not stay long. Many administrative staff reported being overwhelmed and that the workload was impacting on their mental health. Legacy Community Rehabilitation Company administrative staff said their work remained unchanged as colleagues did not have the time to train them in their new administrative tasks. Training these staff would have a positive and swift impact on administrative workloads.

Do the skills and profile of staff support the delivery of a high-quality service for all people on probation?

Risk of serious harm levels were either unassessed or unreasonable in just under a quarter of cases (22 per cent), indicating that any subsequent accurate allocation to the appropriate grade of staff would be difficult.

For those staff training to be a PO (studying for the PQiP qualification), cases were largely co-worked. However, with the lack of staff, PQiP learners were holding greater volumes of cases than would be normal, and this was unhelpful in enabling them to reflect and train sufficiently well. A majority of staff, when asked, said they had the skills to do their job (96 per cent) yet this was not evidenced in the quality of inspected work. It is not possible to ascertain whether this is as a result of probation practitioners not having sufficient time to undertake the necessary work, or whether there were in fact gaps in their skills.

While some staff talked of a frustration with the PDU decision not to allow secondments, due to staffing issues, there was evidence of staff being supported to apply for promotion opportunities. This was particularly evident for those POs who had successfully applied for promotion to SPO roles. However, this has created vacancies within the PO cohort. Some legacy CRC staff are yet to complete the mandatory training required to enable a move to blended caseloads.

Does the oversight of work support high-quality delivery and professional development?

Staff at a variety of grades spoke of a lack of regular, structured supervision, supported by HM Inspectorate of Probation's practitioner survey. Almost 45 per cent of staff reported that they received supervision to support the quality of their work they received 'not that often', or 'not at all'. However, we recognise that up until recently, the SPO group have been significantly under-resourced, which may have impacted on how POs and PSOs experienced support. In our meetings with probation practitioners it was clear that they gained significant support from their peers and there was a sense of camaraderie in difficult circumstances.

Of concern was the fact that in cases inspected, management oversight was assessed as insufficient, ineffective or absent in three quarters of cases. Which given the poor quality of case supervision overall was perhaps unsurprising.

Do managers pay sufficient attention to staff engagement?

Offices hold regular 'huddles' as a way of sharing information across teams, which were valued by staff. The push for staff to return to the office post Covid-19 can only support events of this type and lead to an increased sense of team. This is crucial in breaking down some of the identified barriers to staff feeling part of one new organisation.

Engagement events have recently commenced which provide staff an opportunity across the PDU to meet with senior leaders and highlight areas of concern. Although it is early days, this appears positive as a way of encouraging staff to identify issues, but also solutions to challenges as they arise. It further provides staff with the opportunity to give the type of upwards feedback that some said they had found difficult to do.

In our practitioner survey almost two thirds of respondents (63.2 per cent) felt that the organisation demonstrated a culture of learning and continuous improvement, at least most of the time. Further, just over half of staff said they had sufficient access to training. The reward and recognition scheme is regularly used to give staff vouchers or small monetary awards to recognise good work. However, over half of staff said that they did not feel that good work was rewarded appropriately, which may in itself impact on levels of engagement.

1.3. Services



A comprehensive range of high-quality services is in place, supporting a tailored and responsive service for all people on probation.

Inadequate

In making a judgement about services, we take into account both the answers to the three questions below and also the rating given to implementation and delivery in the domain two case reviews. Services have been rated 'Inadequate' because the range and quality of services do not support a tailored and responsive service for all people on probation, and because all of the ratings in our domain two case reviews were 'Inadequate'.

Are the right volume, range and quality of services in place to meet the needs of people on probation?

Characteristics of inspected cases⁴

Proportion of inspected cases who are female	11%
Proportion of inspected cases who are black, Asian or minority ethnic	3%
Proportion of inspected cases with a disability	38%
Proportion of inspected cases where inspectors identified drug misuse problems	35%
Proportion of inspected cases where inspectors identified alcohol misuse problems	48%
Number of accredited programme requirements for individuals convicted of a sexual offence that have not commenced ⁵	85%
Number of accredited programme requirements that have not commenced, other than for individuals convicted of a sexual offence	77%
Average waiting time before commencing a Rehabilitation Activity Requirement (RAR)	16.33 weeks
Proportion of unpaid work requirements with hours outstanding beyond 12 months	33.33%

Are the right volume, range and quality of services in place to meet the needs of people on probation?

It is disappointing that learning from the commissioning of services under former Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) contracts with regards to volumes, has not been considered in the commissioning of CRS services. The demand for some CRS interventions is exceeding expected levels and as a result there are delays and backlogs.

⁴ HM Inspectorate of Probation inspection data.

⁵ Data supplied by The Probation Service.

How services were implemented and delivered to support the person on probation's desistance and risk management was not evidenced in the majority of cases inspected (54 per cent for desistance and 75 per cent for risk management). Diversity and protected characteristic information are recorded in most cases. However, there was no evidence to suggest that this has routinely been used to monitor how diversity impacts those accessing and indeed successfully completing probation services.

When assessing how services were delivered to effectively support the safety of other people, it was the medium-risk cases that gave us the most concern. In over three quarters of medium-risk cases, delivered interventions and services were insufficient. The cohort of inspected cases commenced shortly after probation unification took place, when Covid-19 was also a factor. These two factors may account for some of the gaps in delivery of quality probation services, but do not negate the deficits that we found – most often and most concerningly around risk of harm activity.

The demand for CRS services does not correlate to what is available and services to address issues around accommodation needs were particularly oversubscribed. The resulting backlogs and delays are frustrating for both staff and CRS providers, and ultimately may have resulted in people on probation not having their needs met. Outside of those services commissioned specifically for women, there were no other commissioned services targeting specific protected characteristic or diversity needs, and probation practitioners reflected that there were gaps, specifically for young men, and young black men in particular.

Commissioned rehabilitation services

In common with other areas, following unification, CRSs have been commissioned across four resettlement pathways. Staff have been briefed on what provision is available and referral pathways to providers are well utilised. Both probation practitioners and CRS providers talked about initial teething problems in the referral process, but these had improved over time. Both parties said that the 'refer and monitor' process by which CRS interventions are accessed, was taking time to bed in and there were still problems in how updated information was shared following the initial referral. When referrals were made and actioned appropriately, probation practitioners talked of positive experiences for themselves and for people on probation. But demand for CRS services exceeded anticipated demand, most acutely for the accommodation provision, which is oversubscribed by 175 per cent, and there are resulting backlogs and waiting lists.

Interventions Alliance currently offer accommodation support to maintain tenancies and education, training and employment (ESE) support. Probation practitioners appeared unclear about the actual accommodation provision and expressed a frustration that individuals on their caseloads were not routinely able to be directly provided with accommodation. (The provision only sets out to provide advocacy and support, rather than accommodation itself). The Women's services are provided by Advance, who are new to working with The Probation Service. They are well thought of by probation practitioners and seen as a very useful resource. However, the service is oversubscribed at a rate of 150 per cent above expected demand. This results in delays and backlogs in people being seen. There are currently no routine female-specific reporting times or places across the PDU. Building works at the Colchester office have meant that some women have had to be seen at local community centres, which has had a positive impact.

Further, there is a women's centre in Harlow which allows access by some women, but this is difficult to access for many, particularly via public transport.

Wellbeing services are provided by The Forward Trust. They are able to provide up to 12 appointments to support an individual before signposting and referring to other opportunities. Staff at all levels talked about their positive experiences of this provision and how it supported people on probation.

There is a danger that probation practitioners will stop referring to these over-subscribed services given their frustrations with the delays and backlogs. Furthermore, there are limited opportunities across all CRS pathways under the current Refer and Monitor process to respond to those in crisis who need immediate intervention.

Accredited programmes and RAR activity

Data provided by the PDU shows that 53 of 62 individuals convicted of a sexual offence are still waiting to commence their accredited programme. Three quarters of all other individuals who are subject to requirements to complete an accredited programme as part of their sentence are also still waiting to commence the intervention. These low levels of participation are a cause of concern.

The number of accredited programmes being run in Essex North PDU exceeds the number of groups being delivered prior to Covid-19 restrictions. However, until very recently these groups have had to run with much reduced participant numbers given Covid-19 restrictions imposed by HM Prison and Probation Service. These restrictions were lifted during the period of fieldwork, but this will clearly take time to impact on delivery, as existing groups need to complete.

For those convicted of sexual offences, intervention completion rates for cases terminating in the previous 12 months are low at 45 per cent. This falls further to 33 per cent for all other programme requirements. There was little evidence of other risk- or desistance-focused work being undertaken in the absence of these programmes being completed. Covid-19 restrictions will no doubt have had a significant part to play in these low completion rates, and it will take time for these to improve. As with other areas of practice, accredited programme delivery is also impacted by vacancies within the programme team. Legacy NPS and CRC facilitators are working in separate teams currently, and a move towards a blended programmes team in the future may support an improved picture in terms of delivery capacity.

There are quarterly engagement events with the courts and sentencers, and in our sentencer survey we found, among the small number responding (nine responses) that they felt well informed about the current state of service provision.

Community sentence treatment requirement

The community sentence treatment requirement is being delivered via a multi-agency approach to address mental health and substance misuse issues across Essex. The treatment – psychological therapy – is delivered by NHS staff and aims to offer an alternative to custody, and thus reduce the number of short-term custodial sentences. Those working on the project described excellent working relationships with sentencers and in particular a local District Judge who has demonstrated a strong commitment to the use of this sentencing option. The demand for the service has resulted in increased resourcing of staff working for the project. However, given the popularity of this requirement, as with other interventions in the area, it is oversubscribed, with delays and backlogs in commencements as a consequence.

While the numbers accessing this provision are relatively small, independent academic evaluations of this resource have been extremely positive and the PDU is justifiably proud of the impact this provision has made.

Community payback

As of the end of December 2021, there were 911 cases with unpaid work requirements under supervision across Essex North PDU. Of those requirements, 33 per cent have hours outstanding beyond 12 months.

It was clear that community payback teams are working hard to try and reduce the backlogs they have. There was a real sense of teamworking to ensure groups were delivered evidenced in the impressively small stand-down rate of 0.5 per cent.

A wide range of group and individual placements are in place to meet the needs of a diverse range of participants. Independent working projects which have stemmed from the 'project in a box' initiative developed during Covid, are well utilised. To overcome Covid-19 limitations and the need to reduce numbers travelling in community payback minibuses, the area has arranged for some participants to go directly to the sites.

Up to 30 per cent of unpaid work hours can also be completed via education, training and employment provision. The delivery of this area of work has been enhanced and significantly promoted, again as a way of supporting individuals to complete their hours, and for the organisation to address backlogs.

Resettlement

'Through the Gate' contracts have been terminated since the unification of services. As yet, there are no short sentence teams in place in Essex North PDU. There is a plan for implementing a short sentence team pilot regionally, in summer 2022, then a further roll out later in the year.

Appropriate resettlement or desistance needs were considered in less than half the cases pre-release. An appropriate level of contact between the probation practitioner and the person on probation, in the lead up to release, happened in only 14 per cent of cases. Delivery of services to reduce reoffending and support desistance were inadequate for many post-release cases (41 per cent), and only slightly better for community cases (43 per cent).

Key risk-of-harm needs were only addressed in 35 per cent of the cases inspected pre-release and this reflects current difficulties in pre-release provision due to staffing challenges. Whilst the involvement of other agencies in managing risk of harm was better evidenced in post-release cases, this was still inadequate and evident in only 21 per cent of cases.

Are relationships with providers and other agencies established, maintained and used effectively to deliver high-quality services to people on probation?

Senior managers are visible at a wide range of strategic boards to support the delivery of key services across Essex North PDU's area. There are further strong relationships reported between probation managers and sentencers. At an operational level, staff have understandably been asked to reduce their attendance at multi-agency forums and meetings in order to focus on core probation work. There is a challenge for managers to identify which meetings their staff need to attend, while still delivering core probation practice.

The inability of probation practitioners to readily and routinely access information around safeguarding and domestic abuse would suggest relationships with the police and local authorities could be improved to support this critical area of work.

It was clear from our meetings with probation practitioners and CRS providers that relationships are positive, and solution focused.

Essex North PDU is working with partners at both a strategic and operational level to support the work of the Violence and Vulnerability Unit. The Essex Violence and Vulnerability Unit is one of 18 across the country and was set up in 2019 by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex, along with partner organisations, including the probation services, to tackle the growing threat of county lines and other gang violence. A variety of projects are included under the unit's umbrella, including a programme to support those transitioning from youth to adult supervision, and targeting individuals in the last six months of a custodial sentence to support their release.

1.4. Information and facilities



Timely and relevant information is available and appropriate facilities are in place to support a high-quality, personalised and responsive approach for all people on probation.

Requires improvement

Are analysis, evidence and learning used effectively to drive improvement?

There is a combined legacy CRC/NPS quality improvement plan at a regional level. This incorporates the core quality management framework, internal assurance activities and learning from external assurance.

In Essex North PDU, staff appeared to prioritise service level targets rather than the quality of work undertaken. The achievement of service level targets needs to be delivered in a way that supports quality otherwise it irrelevant. Our inspection would suggest that the attainment of service level targets is not supporting quality delivery.

Until recently, there have been vacancies among the Quality Development Officer group and vacancies have clearly impacted on the quality of case management. There are mandatory training requirements related to unification, although sharing and prioritising wider learning at this point is not being achieved routinely. In our probation practitioner survey, 63.2 per cent told us they felt learning was shared either 'always' or 'most of the time'. Throughout the inspection, evidence was provided of ongoing performance monitoring and some limited audit activity; however, there was little evidence of analysis of outcomes to drive improvements in service delivery.

Do the policies and guidance in place enable staff to deliver a high-quality service, meeting the needs of all people on probation?

The national EquiP portal is used by staff to access policy and guidance documents. Bulletins from the regional probation director, and other regional and local correspondence are circulated to staff. Feedback from staff was that staff at all levels were often overloaded with the amount of information that they received via email, while managing busy workloads.

Do the premises and offices enable staff to deliver a quality service, meeting the needs of all people on probation?

Staff in Essex North PDU usually operate across three offices – Harlow, Chelmsford and Colchester. Staff are also based in Colchester and Chelmsford magistrates' courts, Chelmsford Crown Court and HM Prison Chelmsford. Staff from both legacy NPS and CRC are co-located in all premises; however, in the Harlow office they remain working on different floors, which negatively impacts on staff feeling that they work for one new unified probation service.

At the point of inspection, the Colchester office was undergoing refurbishment, expected to last approximately 10 weeks, which meant that services are currently being delivered from a variety of other settings, including community centres. While this was challenging it was also providing some opportunities to deliver services in community spaces, and groups in larger rooms.

Over 60 per cent of probation practitioners who responded to our survey reported that premises and offices supported the delivery of appropriate work and the effective engagement of people on probation.

Do the information and communication technology systems enable staff to deliver a high-quality service, meeting the needs of all people on probation?

All staff have access to laptops and work telephones to enable flexible working, both in offices and in home locations. Wi-Fi is not available across a number of the offices and this does cause difficulties for some staff, including those working for CRS providers. There is a concerted effort to encourage staff to work from offices more frequently while still allowing for home working as part of a blended approach to a post Covid-19 working environment. This may support the delivery of services and can only benefit the PDU's overall culture and a sense of all staff working for one organisation.

Feedback from people on probation

People on probation spoken to as part of this inspection were overwhelmingly positive about their experience of being managed by Essex North PDU. Of those we spoke to, 98 per cent either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' they had been able to see their probation practitioner in a timely manner, when required. The majority of those interviewed, 88 per cent, reported feeling safe in probation premises, and a similar percentage described being able to have private conversations. Most survey respondents said they were happy with the support from The Probation Service overall.

The large majority of people on probation surveyed (85 per cent) stated that probation had asked for their views. However, only two out of 13 interviewed felt that they had been able to have their say about how probation is run.

Essex North is one of a few PDUs in the region where peer mentors are in place to support compliance, working with practitioners to respond where additional support is needed. This is a positive and growing area of work. User Voice councils are established in Essex, to canvas the views of people on probation.

Diversity and inclusion

Diversity information is collected for people on probation; however, there is no evidence of active use of data to inform service provision. Diversity information for the local population was not available in the evidence in advance and therefore we were unable to make an informed judgement in regard to how the workforce reflects the diversity of the local population.

The representation of black, Asian or minority ethnic Pos across Essex North PDU is higher than the average recorded across the East of England as a region, with 17 per cent of Pos identifying as black, Asian or minority ethnic (regional average 12 per cent), and 21 per cent of PSOs (13 per cent regionally). There is a regional strategy and action plan in place formulated in response to HM Inspectorate of Probation's race equality inspection, and this has been shared and discussed across Essex North PDU.

Our inspection found that 81 per cent of both probation officers and 75 per cent of probation service officers are female, in comparison to only 13 per cent of the overall caseload being female. Just under half (46 per cent) of Essex North PDU's current caseload have a disability, in comparison to approximately 25 per cent of probation practitioners. There is no protected characteristic information available for SPO grades.

In our practitioner survey, 8 out of 38 practitioners indicated they required reasonable adjustments, but these were only evidenced as being completed in two instances.

2. Court work and case supervision

We inspected 47 community sentence cases and 18 post-release supervision cases that commenced between August and September 2021. We inspected 23 court reports arising from those cases, which were completed by Essex North Probation Delivery Unit's (PDU's) probation practitioners. We examined the quality of assessment, planning, implementation and delivery, and reviewing in each case. Each of these elements was inspected in respect of engaging the person on probation and addressing issues relevant to offending and desistance. The quality of work undertaken in relation to each element of case supervision needs to be above a specific threshold for it to be rated as satisfactory. We also inspected the outcomes achieved for people on probation and provide data on these results.

For assessment, planning implementation and delivery, and reviewing we found that questions about the management of risk of harm and keeping other people safe were rated poorly by our inspectors. While other areas such as engaging the person on probation and supporting desistance were assessed more positively, as a result of the poor risk of harm scores overall we rated our case supervision standards as 'Inadequate'.

Key data

Case supervision

Strengths:

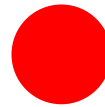
- Over three quarters of court reports had appropriately considered the individuals' motivation to change.
- Diversity needs had been considered appropriately in three quarters of court reports inspected.
- The majority of assessments and plans inspected engaged the person on probation well.

Areas for improvement:

- Risk of serious harm assessments were not sufficient in three quarters of inspected cases.
- There was a lack of consideration of all available information, including that from other agencies, in over 40 per cent of cases at the point of assessment.
- Domestic abuse checks and child safeguarding information were not conducted when they should have been in just under half of inspected cases.
- There was an over-reliance on self-reporting by those under supervision, with this information not routinely being challenged or verified sufficiently well.
- Enforcement activity was not actioned in a quarter of inspected cases when it should have been.
- There was a lack of focus on prioritising those factors most pertinent to offending, and of most concern in the management of the risk of serious harm.

- Risk management with other agencies was sufficiently well-coordinated in only 21 per cent of inspected cases inspected.

2.1 Court work



The pre-sentence information and advice provided to court supports its decision-making.

Inadequate

Our rating⁶ for court work is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against the key question:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Is the pre-sentence information and advice provided to court sufficiently analytical and personalised to the individual, supporting the court's decision-making?	32%

Essex North PDU is rated as 'Inadequate' for court work on the basis that only 32 per cent of reports inspected were sufficiently analytical and personalised to the individual, to support court sentencing decision-making. This was based on the inspection of 23 court reports.

Domestic abuse checks were not undertaken in 12 of the 23 inspected cases, prior to the report being presented to court. Where checks were made these were returned in only four cases prior to sentencing. Two further requests were received after sentencing and a further three evidenced checks were either not returned, or not recorded.

Child safeguarding checks were also not made as necessary in all applicable cases. Of the 23 reports inspected, child safeguarding checks should have informed 18 reports. However, checks were not completed for half of these reports. Of those requests that were made, only four of them had been returned prior to sentence. Concerningly, we found a number of cases where it was recorded in case records that checks had been made but there was no evidence that this had actually taken place. The subsequent advice to court had suggested in these cases that there were no concerns. It was not clear whether this was as a result of poor recording of checks being made, or a reliance on self-report by those being sentenced. Either way, this is an area that needs attention.

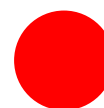
We assessed that five of the 23 court proposals did not appropriately consider risk-of-harm issues sufficiently well and 18 cases did not draw on available sources of information, including child safeguarding and domestic abuse information, well enough. Given the lack of information gathering in relation to specific risk issues, the accuracy of proposals to court is questionable.

⁶ The rating for the standard is driven by the score for the key question, which is placed in a rating band.

How those being sentenced were engaged in the process was more positive. Over three quarters of reports had appropriately considered individuals' motivation to change, and a similar percentage considered the diversity needs of the individual.

In our meeting with court staff, they said for magistrates' courts in particular the constant pressure to deliver timely reports meant probation practitioners often felt rushed when completing reports. Court backlogs, as a result of Covid-19, have increased overall court demand, and subsequent demands on probation practitioners in court. There are three vacancies in the court team currently which has impacted on the ability of the team to fully service the needs of the court. By contrast, our survey of sentencers indicated a generally positive picture in terms of relationships between sentencers and probation practitioners, and their satisfaction in the quality of advice and work delivered to the Court.

2.2. Assessment



Assessment is well-informed, analytical and personalised, actively involving the person on probation.

Inadequate

Our rating⁷ for assessment is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does assessment focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	61%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on the factors linked to offending and desistance?	45%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	23%

Essex North PDU is rated as 'Inadequate' for assessment as the lowest score out of the three key questions was just 23 per cent. This score relates to keeping other people safe, so over three quarters of assessments were found not to inadequately address this area.

High-quality initial assessments are key to establishing what is needed for people on probation and enable those working with them to identify appropriate interventions to promote desistance and support effective risk management. However, the quality of assessment across the inspected cases was not good enough. Staff were clear of the need to complete assessments within a defined time, and this has potentially impacted on the quality of assessments overall.

It is recognised that the inspected cases commenced relatively soon after the unification of The Probation Service. Further, it was a period during which middle

⁷ The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table.

manager/senior probation officer (SPO) resource was severely depleted and this no doubt impacted on the oversight and management of the work. Additionally, Covid-19 working arrangements under an exceptional delivery model were in place at the commencement of many of the inspected cases. However, the fact remains that the assessment of cases inspected was not completed to the necessary standard.

Probation practitioner engagement with individuals was more positive; we found 61 per cent of cases where the probation practitioner sufficiently engaged the person on probation. Where we saw this delivered well there was evidence of probation practitioners considering diversity issues and protected characteristics appropriately and considering how such factors impact on an individual's ability to engage and comply. However, strengths and protective factors were not appropriately identified in 34 per cent of cases.

The assessment of factors linked to offending and desistance was insufficient in 55 per cent of cases. There was analysis of offending-related behaviour in a minority of cases, and identification of strengths and protective factors was seen in too few cases. Only 44 per cent of assessments sufficiently drew on available sources of information when considering offending and desistance factors.

Specific concerns relating to victims were not analysed often enough and domestic abuse checks were not undertaken where they should have been in 45 per cent of cases overall. Child safeguarding checks were not undertaken where required in the same percentage of cases. Given our similar concerns in relation to checks at the point of sentencing, this is a specific cause of concern. There have been missed opportunities to identify risk factors for individuals and, without this information, sufficiently comprehensive and analytical assessments are unlikely.

We found a number of assessments where key risk information had not been sought at all where it should have been, and others where risk information had been received but not fully or appropriately integrated into assessments of risk of harm.

Over three quarters of cases were considered to have assessed the risk of harm appropriately. This was, however, despite assessments of risk of serious harm insufficiently drawing on available sources of information in 70 per cent of cases. The lack of detail and sources of information used to inform the assessment means there could not be confidence that all risk factors, linked to both reoffending and harm, were known or understood and this is reflected in the overall 'Inadequate' rating.

2.3. Planning



Planning is well-informed, holistic and personalised, actively involving the person on probation.

Inadequate

Our rating⁸ for planning is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions:

⁸ The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table.

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does planning focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	56%
Does planning focus sufficiently on reducing reoffending and supporting desistance?	52%
Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	37%

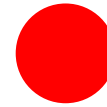
Sound planning following assessment is crucial to give clarity of what is required in terms of interventions and engagement throughout the period of supervision. Essex North PDU is rated as 'Inadequate' for planning. The lowest score relates to the sufficient focus in planning on keeping other people safe, with this assessed as sufficient in only 37 per cent of inspected cases.

Our inspection scores for plans were similar to those for our assessment standard, which reflects the fact that plans are, at least in part, based on initial assessments. Covid-19 restrictions may have contributed to the low scores in this area. As with assessments, the cases selected commenced during a period when the PDU's SPO grades were significantly under-resourced. It is concerning that the majority of people on probation whose cases we inspected did not have a sufficient plan to work towards throughout their period of supervision. Risk management and contingency planning in particular should have been prioritised more often.

Just under half of cases inspected showed insufficient evidence of people on probation being effectively engaged in the planning of their supervision. In many cases there was no sense of ownership of individual plans, and information contained within some plans was inaccurate or dated, including elements of previous orders in some instances that had since been removed. Appropriate objectives linked to offending and desistance were not identified or evidenced in almost half of assessed plans. This is not sufficient. In the majority of cases, the most pertinent factors linked to reoffending were not actively being addressed.

Plans to address risk-of-harm factors were insufficient in almost two thirds of inspected cases. In the absence of critical risk information in assessments, plans continued to lack the required detail and risk-related objectives to meet individual need and the appropriate management of risk. Given that the management of risk and keeping people safe is key probation business, these are concerning omissions.

2.4. Implementation and delivery



High-quality well-focused, personalised and coordinated services are delivered, engaging the person on probation.

Inadequate

Our rating⁹ for implementation and delivery is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Is the sentence or post-custody period implemented effectively with a focus on engaging the person on probation?	64%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support desistance?	46%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?	25%

In common with other inspected elements, Essex North PDU is rated as 'Inadequate' for implementation and delivery of the sentence. The lowest score for the key questions relates to whether there was sufficient focus on keeping others safe. We found that this was demonstrated in only a quarter of inspected cases.

As with assessment and planning, engagement with the person on probation, in the implementation and delivery of the sentence, attracts the highest scores. However, this is still below the line of sufficiency against HM Inspectorate of Probation's standards. In 29 per cent of cases, the person on probation had three or more probation practitioners assigned to their case, which would clearly have an impact on an individual's ability to engage in the objectives of their sentence. In our survey with people on probation, many respondents talked of a change in officer, with this quote being typical of what we were told:

"I have had three different officers in the three to four months I've been on probation. That makes it difficult to build that relationship to be honest."

We found that probation practitioners had been flexible and taken account of individual circumstances in over three quarters of cases. While this is positive, it is in contrast with our findings that enforcement action had not been taken in almost a quarter of cases where it should have been. Potentially this indicates that the level of flexibility was unhelpful in delivering the order of the court. Requirements of the sentence were started promptly in the majority of cases. However, subsequent delivery to address offending-related factors was insufficient in more than half of cases and the management of risk of harm was insufficient in three quarters of cases.

⁹ The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table.

The majority of people on probation were being seen face to face, with two thirds of cases having appropriate levels of contact. However, contact levels with people on probation were insufficient in 38 per cent of cases to support desistance. They were insufficient in supporting risk of harm in 48 per cent of cases. It was clear that many of the appointments consisted of little more than a 'check in' with limited evidence of offence-focused work. Even when information was shared with a probation practitioner, there was no sense that information was being checked, explored or verified. People on probation reported that the content and length of contact was insufficient for some. When asked what they would like to see improved, one said:

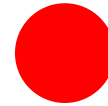
“Definitely being able to have a longer appointment when you need it and for appointments to be face to face and not on the phone. I like to see the person I’m telling stuff to so I know they are taking notice of me and not doing something else whilst talking to me.”

Almost half of inspected cases did not have sufficient levels of contact to support successful risk management. Yet again we found that the management of risk was poor. There was little difference in these results when considering levels of risk, and no sense that practitioners were managing higher-risk cases any differently than lower- and medium-risk cases. This is concerning and resonates with our findings that suggest that people are struggling to know what and how to prioritise their work.

For cases in custody, contact with probation practitioners prior to release appeared not to be routinely prioritised, with 10 of 19 cases not having been contacted in custody prior to their release. This may, at least in part, be as a result of the dismantling of the resettlement hub at the start of 2022 which will have resulted in changes in officers for some resettlement cases. Although there is a multi-agency focus on the highest-risk individuals via multi-agency public protection arrangements, we found that a successful approach coordinating the involvement of other agencies to be insufficient in 43 per cent of cases where we assessed it to be needed.

There were delays in individuals commencing any type of intervention. This is a result of limited delivery of interventions due to Covid-19, and delays and backlogs in accessing CRSs. It took an average of 16 weeks for rehabilitation activity requirement (RAR) days to be commenced – this is too long. While the use of probation practitioner tool kits and structured interventions were available, there was limited evidence that these were routinely being used, or that their use was embedded into practice.

2.5. Reviewing



Reviewing of progress is well-informed, analytical and personalised, actively involving the person on probation. **Inadequate**

Our rating¹⁰ for reviewing is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting the compliance and engagement of the person on probation?	64%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting desistance?	44%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	29%

When assessing how cases are reviewed, we consider not only the formal process of completing a review of risks and needs but also the process of continuous review within the life of a case that is responsive to change in risk and need levels. Essex North PDU is rated as 'Inadequate' for reviewing. The lowest score, as with other areas of case inspection, was in relation to the review of risk of harm. Inspected cases lacked focus on reviewing how supervision was keeping other people safe, with only 29 per cent of cases considering this sufficiently well.

In most cases inspected, practitioners had reviewed the engagement and compliance of individuals. People on probation were engaged sufficiently well in reviewing their supervision in almost two thirds of cases. However, all too often, reviews failed to identify and address changes in factors linked to offending behaviour, with this not being evidenced in 45 per cent of cases. There was a lack of focus on progressing a person on probation through their sentence and ensuring appropriate oversight of behaviours linked to offending. Reviewing that sufficiently focused on supporting the individual's desistance was not evidenced in just over half of cases.

Where there were changes in risk, including its escalation, there was a lack of clarity about how these issues had been reviewed and addressed. Information from other agencies was not fully integrated into reviews of cases, which is a key task for those where multiple agencies are working with individuals. We found cases where risk information had been received but no action had been taken where it would have been helpful. There appeared to be a lack of professional curiosity in staff when considering this information, and an overreliance on self-report by those under supervisions. Further, people on probation were not routinely involved in the review of risk-of-harm factors. Written plans to review risk of harm were not found

¹⁰ The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table.

in 55 per cent of cases where it was assessed by inspectors that they were needed. This was indicative of our case inspections overall, which demonstrated a lack of focus on risk at all stages of the case management process.

2.6. Outcomes

Early outcomes are positive, demonstrating reasonable progress for the person on probation.

Outcomes	Percentage 'Yes'
Do early outcomes demonstrate that reasonable progress has been made, in line with the personalised needs of the person on probation?	41%

We do not currently rate the Outcomes standard but provide this data for information and benchmarking purposes only.

When assessing early outcomes in cases inspected, we found limited progress being made. Our findings indicate a degree of engaging people on probation. However, addressing factors linked to reoffending, supporting desistance and managing the risk of serious harm are all lacking in how the PDU is supporting individuals under supervision. While the level of contact was generally sufficient, engagement with other organisations and services was lacking.

Probation practitioners reported insufficient time to complete any meaningful work with those they supervise, and this was evident in the inspected cases. Initial plans set out to identify appropriate work, but in reality, this rarely resulted in meaningful work being delivered. Of the cases we inspected, only 20 per cent were assessed as having made some improvements in those factors most closely linked to offending. This included improvements in accommodation, thinking and behaviour, and employment. However, 29 per cent of those cases inspected were either charged or convicted of new offences since starting their order or licence.

Compliance levels of inspected cases were largely positive with 67 percent of cases having been complaint all or most of the time. Breach action had been taken in the majority of cases where it was needed with only 9 per cent of cases where breach or recall action had not been taken where it should have done.

Services being accessed via the CRSs were viewed positively by probation practitioners. However, it is clear that the demand for many services exceeded available resource. This resulted in backlogs and delays in work being undertaken.

CRS providers told us that there were initial teething problems with the referral process, with referrals often lacking in detail, particularly in relation to risk. However, they reported that things had improved, although we found that there were still opportunities for improvement when risk or personal details, such as addresses, changed following the initial referral being made. Both structured interventions and the user of accredited 'toolkits' are yet to be fully embedded into practice. Staff were aware and positive of them, but many said that they were unable to complete them in practice due to the number of appointments they had to have, given their current

caseloads. There are lengthy delays in the commencement of RAR activities, which stand in excess of 16 weeks.

Annexe one – Progress against previous recommendations

HM Inspectorate of Probation has made recommendations for the previous Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and the National Probation Service (NPS) divisions, arising from core and thematic inspections. Since the unification of the probation service, we have expected The Probation Service to continue to implement these recommendations. Below are our findings from the inspection of Essex North PDU in respect of the relevant recommendations.

All recommendations are taken from: *HMIP ACTION PLAN 2021: East of England Probation Service. An Action Plan summarising key remaining activity within East of England Probation Service, in response to HMI Probation recommendations made to Essex CRC (October 2018) and South East and Eastern NPS (September 2019).*

Recommendation

Improve understanding of service user need and risk of harm so as to support further development of commissioning and co-commissioning of services

Inspection Findings

Diversity and other information is collected for people on probation; however, there is no evidence of active use of data to inform service provision. **No progress.**

Recommendation

Develop and deliver a clear action plan to improve responsible officers' skills in identifying, managing and reducing service user risk of causing serious harm to others

Inspection Findings

Focusing sufficiently on keeping others safe was scored lowest against all key questions across assessment, planning, implementation and delivery, as well as review. **No progress.**

Recommendation

Review the processes underpinning the delivery of Through the Gate work, to make systematic and better use of the available resources.

Inspection Findings

There is no ongoing Through the Gate provision, although referrals to commissioned services can be made for pre-release support. Short sentence teams are yet to be set up in the community. **No progress.**

Recommendation

Develop specific support arrangements to increase the level of engagement and compliance among black, Asian and minority ethnic service users.

Inspection Findings

Diversity information is collected for people on probation; however, there is no evidence of active use of data to inform service provision. **No Progress.**

Recommendation

Ensure the standard of both case management practice and management oversight in assessment, planning, service delivery and reviewing is improved so that actual and potential victims are kept safe.

Inspection findings

The quality of case management across all domain two areas is unsatisfactory. Risk of harm in particular across all inspected areas produced the lowest scores and were of concern. Management oversight in cases was considered to be insufficient, ineffective or absent in 75 per cent of all cases. **No Progress.**

Recommendation

Ensure action is taken to protect victims in all cases, including those assessed as medium ROSE [risk of serious harm].

Inspection findings:

Victim liaison teams were not spoken to as part of this PDU inspection. Domain two data indicates that for assessment, planning, implementation and review, keeping people, including victims, safe was the weakest element of the work. **No progress.**

Recommendation

Ensure that risk of serious harm screening is undertaken at court and identifies all known risk factors and potential victims.

Inspection findings:

Domain two data indicates that in 39 per cent of cases necessary checks were not made with police or children's services where they were needed at court. Checks were sometimes recorded as having been made at the court stage yet there was no evidence that this was the case. **No progress.**

Annexe two – Staffing and workload data

Data in this section is largely provided by The Probation Service. We cannot confirm its reliability, although where possible it has been verified using internal workforce planning information.

Key staffing data¹¹

Total staff headcount (full-time equivalent) (FTE)	171
Total number of senior probation officers (SPOs)	12
Total number of probation officers (POs) (FTE)	53
Total number of probation service officers (PSOs) (FTE)	71
Vacancy rate (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total staff headcount)	25%
Vacancy rate of SPO grade only (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total number of required SPO posts)	61%
Vacancy rate of PO grade only (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total number of required PO posts)	26%
Vacancy rate of PSO grade only (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total number of required PSO posts)	58%
Sickness absence rate (average days lost in previous 12 months for all staff)	7.42%
Staff attrition (percentage of all staff leaving in 12-month period)	14%
Staff attrition SPO grade only (percentage of all SPO-grade staff leaving in 12-month period)	Not provided
Staff attrition PO grade only (percentage of all PO-grade staff leaving in 12-month period)	3%
Staff attrition PSO grade only (percentage of all PSO-grade staff leaving in 12-month period)	21%

¹¹ Data supplied by the Probation Service.

Caseload and workload data¹¹

Average caseload per PO (FTE)	39.44
Average caseload per PSO (FTE)	56.35
Workload management tool (WMT) average per PO	139%
WMT average per PSO	123%

Inspection workload data¹²

Proportion of POs (or equivalent) in this Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) describing workload as unmanageable	83%
Proportion of PSOs (or equivalent) in this PDU describing workload as unmanageable	85%

¹² HM Inspectorate of Probation's inspection data.

Annexe three – Inspection data

In this section, questions marked * do not apply in unpaid work only cases, and questions marked ** do not apply in every case. Only the positive answers are reported in these tables, which do not include cases where the question is not applicable.

2.1 Court work	% "Yes"
Is the pre-sentence information and advice provided to court sufficiently analytical and personalised to the individual, supporting the court's decision-making?¹³	
Does the information and advice draw sufficiently on available sources of information including child safeguarding and domestic abuse information?	22%
Is the individual meaningfully involved in the preparation of the report, and are their views considered?	87%
Does the advice consider factors related to the likelihood of reoffending?	87%
Does the advice consider factors related to risk of harm? **	74%
Does the advice consider the individual's motivation and readiness to change?	77%
Does the advice consider the individual's diversity and personal circumstances?	77%
Does the advice consider the impact of the offence on known or identifiable victims?	65%
Is an appropriate proposal made to court? **	82%
Is there a sufficient record of the advice given, and the reasons for it?	95%

Questions marked ** do not apply in every case. Only positive answers are reported in this data.

2.2. Assessment	% "Yes"
Does assessment focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	
Does assessment analyse the motivation and readiness of the person on probation to engage and comply with the sentence?	58%
Does assessment analyse the protected characteristics of the individual and consider the impact these have on their ability to comply and engage with service delivery?	52%
Does assessment analyse the personal circumstances of the individual, and consider the impact these have on their ability to comply and engage with service delivery?	68%
Is the person on probation meaningfully involved in their assessment, and are their views taken into account?	66%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on the factors linked to offending and desistance?	
Does assessment identify and analyse offending-related factors?	53%
Does assessment identify the strengths and protective factors of the person on probation? **	58%
Does assessment draw sufficiently on available sources of information?	44%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	
Does assessment clearly identify and analyse any risk of harm to others, including identifying who is at risk and the nature of that risk?	36%
Does assessment draw sufficiently on available sources of information, including past behaviour and convictions, and involve other agencies where appropriate?	30%
Does assessment analyse any specific concerns and risks related to actual and potential victims? **	28%

2.3. Planning	% "Yes"
Does planning focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	
Is the person on probation meaningfully involved in planning, and are their views taken into account?	50%
Does planning take sufficient account of the diversity factors of the individual which may affect engagement and compliance? **	30%
Does planning take sufficient account of the personal circumstances of the individual which may affect engagement and compliance? **	50%
Does planning take sufficient account of the readiness and motivation of the person on probation to change which may affect engagement and compliance?	56%
Does planning set out how all the requirements of the sentence or licence/post-sentence supervision will be delivered within the available timescales?	56%
Does planning set a level, pattern and type of contact sufficient to engage the individual and to support the effectiveness of specific interventions?	66%
Does planning focus sufficiently on reducing reoffending and supporting desistance?	
Does planning sufficiently reflect offending-related factors and prioritise those which are most critical? *	44%
Does planning build on the individual's strengths and protective factors, utilising potential sources of support? **	50%
Does planning set out the services most likely to reduce reoffending and support desistance?	50%

Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	
Does planning sufficiently address risk-of-harm factors and prioritise those which are most critical? **	41%
Does planning set out the necessary constructive and/or restrictive interventions to manage the risk of harm? **	38%
Does planning make appropriate links to the work of other agencies involved with the person on probation and any multi-agency plans? **	33%
Does planning set out necessary and effective contingency arrangements to manage those risks that have been identified? **	35%

2.4 Implementation and delivery	% "Yes"
Is the sentence or post-custody period implemented effectively with a focus on engaging the person on probation?	
Do the requirements of the sentence start promptly, or at an appropriate time?	58%
Is sufficient focus given to maintaining an effective working relationship with the person on probation, taking into account their diversity needs?	75%
Are sufficient efforts made to enable the individual to complete their sentence, including flexibility to take appropriate account of their personal circumstances?	77%
Are risks of non-compliance identified and addressed in a timely fashion to reduce the need for enforcement actions? **	47%
Are enforcement actions taken when appropriate? **	27%
Are sufficient efforts made to re-engage the individual after enforcement actions or recall? **	30%

Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support desistance?	
Are the delivered services those most likely to reduce reoffending and support desistance, with sufficient attention given to sequencing and the available timescales?	43%
Wherever possible, does the delivery of services build upon the individual's strengths and enhance protective factors? **	46%
Is the involvement of other organisations in the delivery of services sufficiently well-coordinated? * **	30%
Are key individuals in the life of the person on probation engaged where appropriate to support their desistance? * **	21%
Is the level and nature of contact sufficient to reduce reoffending and support desistance?	49%
Are local services engaged to support and sustain desistance during the sentence and beyond? * **	41%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?	
Is the level and nature of contact offered sufficient to manage and minimise the risk of harm? **	43%
Is sufficient attention given to protecting actual and potential victims? **	19%
Is the involvement of other agencies in managing and minimising the risk of harm sufficiently well-coordinated? * **	21%
Are key individuals in the life of the person on probation engaged where appropriate to support the effective management of risk of harm? * **	19%
Are home visits undertaken where necessary to support the effective management of risk of harm? * **	24%

Prompts relevant to post-custody cases only:	
Post-custody cases only: Did the community offender manager ensure a proportionate level of contact with the prisoner before release?	14%
Post-custody cases only: Did the community offender manager address the key resettlement or desistance needs before release?	13%
Post-custody cases only: Did the community offender manager address key risk of harm needs before release?	11%

2.5 Reviewing	% "Yes"
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting the compliance and engagement of the person on probation?	
Does reviewing consider compliance and engagement levels and any relevant barriers, with the necessary adjustments being made to the ongoing plan of work? **	59%
Is the person on probation meaningfully involved in reviewing their progress and engagement?	59%
Are written reviews completed as appropriate as a formal record of actions to implement the sentence? **	27%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting desistance?	
Does reviewing identify and address changes in factors linked to offending behaviour, with the necessary adjustments being made to the ongoing plan of work? *	36%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on building on the strengths and enhancing the protective factors of the person on probation? **	39%
Is reviewing informed by the necessary input from other agencies working with the person on probation? **	30%
Are written reviews completed as appropriate as a formal record of the progress towards desistance? **	21%

Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	
Does reviewing identify and address changes in factors related to risk of harm, with the necessary adjustments being made to the ongoing plan of work? **	20%
Is reviewing informed by the necessary input from other agencies involved in managing the risk of harm? **	19%
Is the person on probation (and, where appropriate, are key individuals in their life) meaningfully involved in reviewing the risk of harm? * **	19%
Are written reviews completed as appropriate as a formal record of the management of the risk of harm? **	20%

2.6 Outcomes	% "Yes"
Do early outcomes demonstrate that reasonable progress has been made, in line with the personalised needs of the person on probation?	
Have there been improvements in those factors most closely linked to offending both in developing strengths and addressing needs?	31%
Has there been a reduction in factors most closely related to risk of harm to others? **	17%
Has there been a reduction in offending?	22%

Annexe four – Web links

Further information about the methodology used to conduct this inspection is available on our website, using the following link:

[Our work \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)

A glossary of terms used in this report is available on our website, using the following link:

[Glossary \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)