



Her Majesty's
Inspectorate of
Probation

An inspection of probation services in:

Northamptonshire PDU

The Probation Service – East of England region

HM Inspectorate of Probation, May 2022

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The role of HM Inspectorate of Probation

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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 fourth Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) in England to be inspected using our new methodology, which was developed following the integration of Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and the National Probation Service (NPS) into a single unified probation service. Our new methodology contains stronger links between judgements on organisational delivery, and court work and case supervision.

The unification of probation services across England took place in June 2021, at a time when social restrictions were in place in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Implementing a new delivery model, while recovering from a pandemic, has not been without its challenges and the impact of this on the delivery of probation services has been seen in Northamptonshire and more broadly across The Probation Service. Case samples for this inspection were taken from those that started supervision in the community in August and September 2021. It is recognised that work to embed the new delivery model and to ensure that staff are skilled and trained to deliver probation services across a unified service is ongoing in the PDU.

We were encouraged to see challenges and risks to service delivery understood at a leadership level in the PDU, translated into a clear vision and strategy, and communicated to managers. Staff delivering frontline services in the PDU expressed a clear commitment to deliver a quality service so those they supervise can make positive changes to their lives. However, there was an inconsistent understanding among staff of what they were being asked to prioritise in order to achieve this.

The commitment and enthusiasm of staff was reflected in their work to engage with people on probation. The feedback from people on probation, as part of this inspection, was largely positive and it was encouraging to see plans to take this forward in the PDU to consult more broadly with people on probation to inform service delivery.

Staff across most grades reported they were working above capacity; and where priorities were understood, the capacity to deliver was hampered by what some staff felt were unmanageable workloads and protracted processes impacting on their ability to work efficiently. However, encouragingly, information exchange arrangements with police domestic abuse units and child safeguarding are impressive and this was reflected in the cases we inspected. Further work is now required to use this information appropriately to improve the focus on keeping people safe in assessments and plans. In our inspection of case activity, keeping people safe was the lowest scoring aspect of case management and we saw this being prioritised in too few cases. Effective multi-agency working was seen in less than half of inspected cases and there was a sufficient focus on protecting actual or potential victims in just under one-third.

Northamptonshire PDU, as with other probation services in England and Wales, continues to experience difficulties with the delivery of accredited programmes, unpaid work and commissioned rehabilitative services (CRS) due to the impact of Covid-19 on delivery. The impact of this was seen in our case inspection. Almost half of the cases we reviewed had not received services most likely to reduce offending and support desistance. The efforts to reduce waiting lists for unpaid work and accredited programmes are recognised, although more work is required to understand waiting times for CRS provision, particularly accommodation. We were pleased to see the Regional Outcomes and Innovation Fund being used to respond to

gaps in services for women and it was encouraging to hear of work being undertaken for interventions to meet the needs of black men.

Northamptonshire PDU is rated as 'Requires improvement' and the foundations are in place to support this improvement. We saw strong leadership, outstanding court work and staff who are absolutely committed to 'doing the right thing' for probation delivery in Northamptonshire.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Justin Russell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent 'J' and 'R'.

Justin Russell
Chief Inspector of Probation

Ratings

Northamptonshire PDU

Score **9/ 27**

Overall rating

Requires improvement



1. Organisational delivery

1.1 Leadership

Requires improvement



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

Outstanding



2.2 Assessment

Requires improvement



2.3 Planning

Requires improvement



2.4 Implementation and delivery

Inadequate



2.5 Reviewing

Requires improvement



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

Northamptonshire PDU should:

1. ensure staff have the relevant training to use risk and safeguarding information, obtained from key stakeholders, to appropriately inform assessments, plans and the delivery of the sentence to improve victim safety
2. ensure that senior probation officers (SPOs) have access to adequate induction and training to prepare them for and develop them in their roles
3. ensure priorities are clearly communicated to and understood by probation practitioners
4. ensure all administrative staff receive the training they need in order to complete the full range of duties following unification
5. implement the regional engaging people on probation strategy to promote their involvement in service delivery.

East of England region should:

6. ensure that management information in relation to CRS is understood at PDU level.

HM Prison and Probation Service should:

7. review how accurately the workload measurement tool reflects workloads in The Probation Service following unification
8. consider how SPO workloads are measured, including the impact and effectiveness of the touchpoint management oversight expectations
9. ensure CRS providers are adequately resourced for the volume of referrals being made
10. review refer and monitor processes to promote effective information exchange between CRS providers and practitioners.

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

Background

Northamptonshire is one of eight PDUs in the East of England probation region, the seven others being Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex North, Essex South, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire. Northamptonshire PDU has probation offices in Northampton, Wellingborough and Kettering. It has three courts: Northampton and Wellingborough magistrates' courts and Northampton Crown Court, and three prisons: HM Prisons Rye Hill, Onley and the recently opened HM Prison Five Wells.

The PDU's area is policed by Northamptonshire Police, covering 914 square miles and serving a population of around 741,000 people. Recorded crime rates for Northamptonshire per 1,000 of the population for offences of violence against the person are (at 37.2) higher than the average for England and Wales (31.6). Sexual offences are higher in Northamptonshire (3.6) when compared to the average in England and Wales (2.8). Police priorities focus on knife crime, domestic abuse, anti-social behaviour and serious organised crime.

The PDU has local representation on strategic boards, which include local criminal justice and reducing reoffending boards, sentencer liaison forums, multi-agency public protection arrangements, integrated offender management and the women's strategy board, although this list is not exhaustive. Northamptonshire safeguarding children board ceased to exist on 30 June 2019 and was replaced with a safeguarding children partnership. The Probation Service is no longer a statutory strategic partner under the new arrangements set out in the 2018 working together to safeguard children strategy, although the PDU is represented on the local multi-agency safeguarding hub steering group.

As of January 2022, Northamptonshire PDU was holding an overall caseload of 1,993 people on probation serving sentences in the community, 683 of which were subject to supervision following release from custody. Black, Asian and minority ethnic people on probation accounted for 26 per cent of caseload, 47 per cent had a declared disability and 13 per cent were female.

In June 2021, staff from the former Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire CRC and staff from the East of England NPS unified. In line with the national target operating model, The Probation Service has commissioned external providers to deliver rehabilitative services. In Northamptonshire PDU, services for women are provided by St Giles Wise Group, who sub-contact delivery to C2C social action. Accommodation and education, training and employment support is provided by Interventions Alliance (part of the Seetec group) and personal wellbeing provision is provided by NACRO.

We conducted fieldwork in Northamptonshire over the period of a week, beginning 28 March 2022. We inspected 64 cases in total which started their probation supervision in the community in August and September 2021 and conducted interviews with 53 probation practitioners and 38 people on probation.

1. Organisational delivery

The head of the Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) in Northamptonshire has a clear vision, aligned to the regional delivery plan. The longer-term vision is to develop a localised delivery plan informed by regional priorities and the specific needs of the PDU, which are well understood by the head of PDU.

The impact of Covid-19 is acknowledged, and Northamptonshire continues to recover from the impact of the pandemic on the delivery of probation services. At the time of our inspection, The Probation Service was nine months post-unification, which introduced significant changes to how probation services were delivered. At the start of 2022, HM Prison Five Wells opened, which has placed additional resource demands on practitioner resource to support resettlement.

We routinely heard from staff across all roles and functions, of a culture of working together to deliver quality services to people on probation. This was reflected in the positive practice we saw to engage people on probation in the cases we inspected. Conversely, we heard that unmanageable workloads for middle managers, court staff, practitioners, case administrators and other critical support functions were impacting on their ability to deliver quality services.

While figures on the workload management tool (WMT) in Northamptonshire are not excessive when compared to the rest of the East of England region, what we heard from staff was very different. We interviewed 53 practitioners in our domain two case assessments and 60 per cent said their workload was not manageable. There are vacancies across senior probation officers (SPO), case administrators and court staff, although there is no national WMT in place for these roles. Out of the 19 probation practitioners who responded to our survey in Northamptonshire, 18 said the organisation prioritises quality. However, there is a 'fatigue' across all roles and a sense of frustration that they are unable to deliver to the quality they strive to achieve.

Sentencer confidence and engagement with the judiciary is positive in Northamptonshire and effective relationships with children's safeguarding and the police domestic abuse unit were evident. This was reflected in the 'Outstanding' court work rating. There is more work to be done to ensure that good information exchange is extended into case supervision following sentence, as evidenced by domain two scores across all inspection standards, to keep people safe.

Strengths:

- The head of PDU understands Northamptonshire's resource issues and gaps in services, proactively managing this through workforce planning and engagement with stakeholders.
- Teamwork is a strength; staff support each other and there is a collective commitment to provide a quality service for people on probation in Northamptonshire across all grades of staff.
- Swift information exchange arrangements are in place with children's safeguarding and domestic abuse agencies.
- Provision for women is well established and the Regional Outcome and Innovation Fund (ROIF) has been used to provide interventions for women. Champions are in place in all three office locations in the PDU.

- Practitioners receive regular supervision from their managers.
- Staff said the organisation prioritises quality, and regional and local quality matters boards have recently been established.

Areas for improvement:

- Middle managers understand the vision of the PDU and their priorities, although practitioners felt their priorities were less clear.
- The views of people on probation are not collated to inform service delivery.
- There is a disconnect between practitioners understanding of commissioned rehabilitative services and what providers are contracted to deliver.
- Waiting lists for people on probation accessing CRS provision are not fully understood in the PDU.
- Many staff regarded their workload as unmanageable and work should continue to address the workload issues in Northamptonshire.
- Management oversight is effective in too few cases.

1.1. Leadership



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

Requires improvement

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 and therefore we operate a decision rule which means that if the results for each area of our domain two case supervision standards are inadequate or requires improvement then performance against the leadership standard can only be rated inadequate or requires improvement. For Northamptonshire PDU, assessment, planning and reviewing for the cases we inspected, were rated 'Requires improvement' and implementation and delivery 'Inadequate'. During our inspection fieldwork we spoke to many staff, who shared a commitment to delivering high-quality services for people on probation and strive to work collectively to achieve this. We saw this embedded in practice to engage with people on probation, although there is further work required, particularly in relation to keeping people safe and access to services and interventions. This has resulted in a rating of 'Requires improvement' for leadership.

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

Northamptonshire PDU has been working toward the regional business plan, which reflects national priorities: 1) enable people to do their best; 2) modernise estates; 3) open learning culture; 4) transform through partnerships. The head of PDU has a clear long-term vision for Northamptonshire to be a high-performing, innovative PDU,

where all staff feel valued and can make a valuable contribution. Priorities include investing in staffing and recruitment to drive the vision forward through localising the Northamptonshire plan, identifying gaps in service provision and working with stakeholders to meet the needs of people on probation.

Middle managers understand the vision, although there are frustrations that their ability to deliver is hampered by workload pressures. While the vision to deliver a high-quality service is one that we heard from many staff across all roles, probation practitioners were less clear what was expected of them in order to achieve this. They spoke of limited capacity to deliver a quality service and being unclear about what to prioritise.

Of those probation practitioners who completed our survey, 18 out of 19 answered positively when asked whether the organisation prioritises quality and 15 out of 19 felt that the PDU has a culture which promotes openness, constructive challenge and ideas either most of or all the time. Local quality matters boards have recently been established, made up of staff across the grades, to work together to understand and improve quality in practice. Innovation is promoted and we saw the ROIF being used for women's services with plans afoot for targeted support services for black men and people on probation with neurodiversity needs.

The head of PDU is a strong advocate for the service and there are both formal and informal opportunities for staff engagement. Weekly 'need to know emails' are circulated highlighting key messages and practice changes, and senior leaders visit local offices to engage and respond to what staff are saying. The Northampton office was regarded by some staff as the 'flagship', with senior leaders, service providers and managers being more visible than in the Kettering and Wellingborough offices.

Of 19 practitioners who responded to our survey, 11 answered negatively when asked whether change was communicated effectively. Despite the efforts to slow down communication in the PDU and package information into weekly headlines, information is also received from a national and regional perspective, which staff find overwhelming.

Sentencers spoke positively of their relationship with probation staff, including court staff, court SPO, and the head and deputy head of the PDU. They described a problem-solving, collaborative relationship working towards a shared goal to provide effective and quality services in court, assisted by regular sentencer engagement events and probation liaison meetings.

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

The extent to which the head of PDU understands the challenges and critical risks to service delivery is impressive. Staffing is a priority risk to the PDU, and the newly opened HM Prison Five Wells creates additional pressures. Staffing figures for the next financial year have been calculated, which forecast an increased vacancy rate among practitioners. Regional workforce planning forums are utilised to respond to vacancies, and locally, resource decisions have been made with the Head of Operations and Head of Resettlement for probation practitioner resource. A business case to move to the amber probation prioritisation framework was being formulated during fieldwork, demonstrating planning in advance to reduce staffing pressures. Critical risks to service delivery are identified in the local PDU risk register, with appropriate mitigations in place to support business continuity.

In June 2021, staff based at Aquila House, the former Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) building, relocated to Bridge Street to be based with former NPS staff in a unified location in Northampton. This was informed by a thorough equality impact assessment, in consultation with staff and trade unions to review progress and consider the impact on staff with protected characteristics.

Legacy CRC case administrators remain in the former CRC 'admin hub' in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, while legacy National Probation Service (NPS) case administrators are based in local offices. The 'admin hub' is almost 40 miles from the Northampton office and remote, rather than on-site, administrative support is provided by those located in Huntingdon. Senior administrators visit staff to deliver training in the hub, but case administrators remain divided by geography. This arrangement reduces the capacity for flexibility across case administrators and impacts on the creation of a cohesive, unified staff group across this important role.

Concerns were raised with us by some staff about the removal of the screens in the 'high-risk interview' rooms. This change has been implemented in response to the national 'blue-print' for probation premises and informed by low violent incident data in the PDU. While this has been discussed and communicated to staff, some staff feel their safety is compromised and their concerns are not being heard.

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

There was a strong sense from all staff, including commissioned rehabilitative service (CRS) providers, that they work together towards a common goal to provide an effective service to improve the lives of people on probation. However, there was an inconsistent understanding of how this would be achieved. Some probation practitioners understood their priorities but felt unable to deliver against them due to competing demands, and those new to role were less able to articulate priorities and what they were accountable for.

The role of CRS providers is not fully understood, particularly accommodation services, and the expectations of probation practitioners do not always align with the service the CRS providers are contracted to provide. This is a frustration for probation practitioners as they are not seeing the outcomes they expect and, for CRS providers, there is a disconnect between the expectation and the reality of the contract. We heard this disconnect was improving since providers have been able to access probation offices and work alongside probation practitioners, but there is some way to go to align the expectations. Of the cases we inspected, 31 per cent of probation practitioners said they 'always' had access to an appropriate range of services to meet the needs and risks of the person on probation, and 56 per cent responded, 'most of the time'. This is reflected in the responses we received from people on probation, with a quarter saying they could not access the services they needed.

Engagement of people on probation is an area of ongoing development and there is a newly appointed SPO in the PDU, with an expert role focused on engagement of people on probation. It is anticipated that service user forums and councils will form part of the PDU plan going forward, but we saw no evidence of formal engagement with people on probation to seek and collate their views to inform service improvements locally. The evidence from the cases we inspected demonstrates that for individual cases engagement of people on probation is particularly strong, although the collective views of people on probation do not currently feature in practice.

1.2. Staff



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

Requires improvement

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. Staff are committed to delivering a quality service, although in Northamptonshire, frustrations are felt across all grades that workload and resource pressures impact on their ability to deliver to the standard they want to achieve. For Northamptonshire PDU, this has resulted in a rating for staffing of 'Requires improvement'.

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

Staffing is a moving picture and the data provided by the region shows that, in January 2022, overall staffing in the PDU exceeded target, although there were vacancies in SPO and probation services officer (PSO) grades. On average, probation officers (POs) were holding 27 cases (97 per cent on the WMT) and the average PSO caseload was 39 (77 per cent on the WMT). This is a more comfortable position than the average caseload figures across the region with the average PO caseload for East of England at 35 and PSOs at 55.

Based on these figures, inspectors were surprised that many staff cited excessive workloads as a barrier to doing their job well. Of the 53 probation practitioners we spoke to in our case inspections, 77 per cent said they had caseloads of less than 50 cases but 60 per cent regarded their workloads as 'not so manageable' or 'not at all manageable'. When compared to other PDUs we have inspected, workload pressure is not as acute, but issues such as cover for staff sickness, training, case management support provided by PSOs, understanding priorities and the need to learn new systems and processes were cited as additional tasks and factors not reflected in the data.

Target and actual staffing figures are understood by the head of PDU, and data provided during fieldwork goes some way towards understanding the gap between the WMT and the narrative we heard from staff. PDU calculations show a vacancy rate of three case administrators, almost 22 PSOs, almost five POs and four SPOs. This leaves a total vacancy level of 32 staff across Northamptonshire. The PO vacancies are, in part, offset by Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) trainees, although not fully as PQiP trainees have reduced caseloads while they are in training.

In January 2022, there were 28 probation practitioners working toward achieving a PQiP in Northamptonshire. While the skills and additional resource of PQiPs was recognised as a positive investment, this is not an immediate solution to the current pressures. Longer term, if PQiPs remain in the PDU, the benefit of increased resources should be seen.

On average, SPOs have line management responsibility for 10 practitioners, although this varies by team. SPOs have additional 'expert lead' roles and those we spoke to welcome the opportunity to influence service delivery in their allocated specialism. However, the extent to which they can fulfil the expectations of their 'expert' role is balanced with the day-to-day operational management responsibilities, which are generally regarded as the priority. Probation practitioners described feeling guilty about approaching managers as they can see the pressures they are working under. There is a strong sense of teamwork in Northamptonshire, with staff across all grades 'pulling together' to support one another, during a period of change and a move towards a unified service.

The case administrator role is crucial and underpins the delivery of quality services. Like other roles, administrative staff described their workload as unmanageable, compounded by a lack of training and induction. Case administrators work with allocated probation practitioners, although not all have the skills and training to cover the range of administrative tasks required.

The head of PDU understands the workload pressures staff experience in Northamptonshire and proactively advocates on their behalf to take forecast vacancy rates to regional workforce planning meetings. There is work required regionally and nationally to reconcile the WMT tool data and the views of staff to inform resource management and support the delivery of a quality service.

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

The demographic profile of people on probation in Northamptonshire shows that 26 per cent identify as from black, Asian or minority ethnic groups. By comparison, black, Asian and minority ethnic staff are under-represented in the PDU, with eight per cent of PSOs and seven per cent of POs from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Females account for 87 per cent of POs and 75 per cent of PSOs, in comparison to 13 per cent of the caseload. Just under half of the caseload has a declared disability compared to a quarter of staff. A working group is in the process of being set up in the PDU to consider how local recruitment campaigns can support the recruitment of a diverse workforce, more reflective of the profile of people on probation.

A unification training checklist is in place for all staff, to be completed in supervision sessions with managers. Progress to move towards mixed caseloads is hampered somewhat by the shortage of PSOs to allocate cases to and outstanding training across the practitioner group. That said, of the probation practitioners we interviewed, 100 per cent responded that they have the necessary skills, experience, and knowledge to supervise the inspected case 'always' (48 per cent) or 'most of the time' (52 per cent). However, from the cases we inspected, keeping people safe is an area for development. Inspectors did not agree with the initial risk classification in 16 per cent of the cases we inspected, and we heard differing interpretations of thresholds of risk of serious harm from practitioners.

Progression routes are in place for POs and PSOs through promotion to SPO and PQiP opportunities, which is positive. The head of PDU tries to balance progression opportunities for staff and keeping experienced staff in roles to provide frontline delivery. While this means that practitioners with a range of experience are delivering sentence management, some long-standing staff feel they do not have equal access to progression and promotion opportunities.

Peer mentors are being utilised by St Giles, the Wise Group and C2C to support women on probation. Regionally, there is a strategy to recruit peer mentors to encourage engagement of people on probation with unpaid work and accredited programmes. We did not find evidence of this work and staff were not aware of this potential support for the cases they supervised.

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

There is a clear commitment across the PDU to provide a quality service to people on probation, although workloads were commonly cited as a barrier to achieving this. Following unification, some managers and practitioners are adjusting to unfamiliar and protracted processes, which are barriers to working effectively and delivering the quality of service they strive to achieve. One manager told us:

“...things like knowing where to find annual leave forms or how to do an occupational health referral. Things like this could be so much easier and give you the confidence to get on with the job.”

SPOs felt unable to implement the ‘touchpoint’ model of management oversight, as intended, and the expectations were felt to be unrealistic. Managers said they were not confident that a national impact assessment had been undertaken to determine how reasonable the expectations are. The pressures on the SPO group were felt to be understood at PDU level, but less so from a regional perspective. Management oversight entries are tracked to monitor compliance with touchpoint expectations, and it was encouraging to hear SPOs speak about the importance of the quality of management oversight and not just that it has happened. Of the cases we inspected, management oversight was insufficient, ineffective or absent in 66 per cent. There is evidence that the focus on quality in practice is not being seen in many cases.

Practitioners spoke of supportive middle managers, who are accessible and visible, although less so in Kettering due to limited office space. Overall, probation practitioners felt supported by their managers and, of the 16 practitioners who responded to this question, 15 said they received supervision that was both frequent and enhanced the quality of work with people on probation.

Northamptonshire is a pilot area for the complex case initiative, which provides multi-agency support for practitioners working with people on probation who meet six or more complex need criterion. Practitioners spoke positively about the additional support this provides, through complex case panels attended by NHS reconnect workers, with the membership growing to include the Head of Public Protection and prison staff.

A local quality matters board has very recently been established, attended by staff from across grades, to take a PDU-wide approach to improve quality, informed by probation practitioners, case administrators and managers. Regional quality matters boards have been in place since November 2021, which determine the regional priorities and inform the local board. Local quality improvement plans are being developed and the PDU is working towards the regional quality improvement plan, informed by regional case data and staff feedback. The PDU has an SPO with an expert lead role in quality and another focusing on performance, who work together to ensure that quality and performance complement one another.

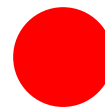
Do managers pay sufficient attention to staff engagement?

Staff recognise the challenges faced by colleagues and there is a strong culture of working together to achieve positive outcomes for people on probation. This was evident from the head of PDU, probation practitioners, managers, case administrators and CRS providers. Of those who responded to our survey, 15 out of 19 practitioners answered positively when we asked whether the culture of the PDU promotes openness, constructive challenge and ideas.

Weekly 'need to know' emails are circulated by the head of PDU to highlight key messages of the week, which include wellbeing updates, recognising the good work of staff and key practice changes. Only five out of 15 practitioners responding to our survey said that exceptional work is recognised and rewarded. Senior leaders in the PDU undertake office visits, followed up with a summary of feedback from staff and responses. Staff, especially case administrators, appreciate senior leaders being visible and welcome more of this, particularly in the north of the county.

A wellbeing champion and mental health allies provide support to staff, and while this is appreciated, we heard that due to high workloads, staff felt their wellbeing was compromised. Some of the wellbeing initiatives are regarded as 'tokenistic' and staff were unsure where the team wellbeing pledge had come from, saying they had not been involved in it and felt unable to implement it. Staff spoke of change 'fatigue' and information overload, although it was recognised by many that the rate of change was a regional and national issue, rather than specific to the PDU. When asked whether change was implemented effectively, only eight out of 19 probation practitioners responding to our survey felt it was.

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 cases reviews. Services has been rated 'Inadequate' because the range and quality of services do not support a tailored and responsive service for all people on probation, and domain two case reviews were also 'Inadequate' for implementation and delivery of the sentence.

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

Characteristics of inspected cases²

Proportion of inspected cases who are female	17%
Proportion of inspected cases who are black, Asian or minority ethnic	6%
Proportion of inspected cases with a disability	32%
Number of inspected cases where inspectors identified drug misuse problems	45%
Number of inspected cases where inspectors identified alcohol misuse problems	53%
Number of accredited programme requirements for individuals convicted of a sexual offence that have not commenced ³	20
Number of accredited programme requirements that have not commenced, other than for individuals convicted of a sexual offence	142
Average waiting time before commencing a Rehabilitation Activity Requirement	12.6 weeks
Proportion of unpaid work requirements with hours outstanding beyond 12 months	31.7%

In Northamptonshire, CRS accommodation provision seems to be the hardest hit by referral rates exceeding that forecast. From day one of the commencement of the contract in June 2021, referral rates were 183 per cent higher than forecast. A 'backlog team' has been funded to work through the waiting lists focusing on those referred for accommodation support between June and October 2021. The funding for this team ceased in March 2022 and waiting lists remain excessive. This frustration is also felt by probation practitioners, who cannot access timely housing support for those who need it.

² HM Inspectorate of Probation's inspection data.

³ Data supplied by The Probation Service.

Referrals exceeding forecast figures is a national issue, although the East of England region has removed the criteria for accommodation referrals to be restricted to those scoring over 25 per cent offender group reconviction score. At PDU level it is not clear to what extent this is impacting on referral rates. Interventions Alliance informed us they try to prioritise prison leavers and CAS 3⁴ referrals, but that they are not in a position to effectively triage referrals as there are 'literally hundreds'.

CRSs are in place for accommodation, education, training and employment (ETE), personal wellbeing and women's services. Regionally, the commissioning board tracks referrals, action plans and start dates for people on probation accessing services. Inspectors were informed by CRS providers there are significant delays in accessing accommodation provision and cases waiting up to six months for support were not uncommon. For women's services, referrals exceeded forecast figures. CRS providers informed inspectors that all referrals for women have now been allocated although they are at different stages with some allocated, some undergoing assessment and some receiving interventions. Practitioners can escalate referrals, although how to do this and under what circumstances was not understood.

ETE and personal wellbeing provision is a more positive picture and providers told us that people on probation accessing these services are allocated quickly. The impact and extent of waiting lists is not fully understood across Northamptonshire. In January 2022, the average waiting time to start rehabilitation activity requirements was 12.6 weeks, including internally delivered RARs, which is too long.

Where referrals are made and actioned, people on probation told us this had a positive impact:

"I have a work coach supporting me. I also have a support worker from the housing association group. I'm looking to start warehouse work next week."

Alongside CRS interventions, Northamptonshire PDU is also utilising the community accommodation service tier 3 provision (CAS3), following homelessness prevention work during the initial waves of the Covid-19 pandemic. This service allocates short-term accommodation for those who would otherwise be homeless. Regional data shows promising results for this service and of 462 prison leavers referred in November 2021, 80 per cent had positive outcomes. CRS accommodation providers strive to prioritise this cohort for tenancy support.

Provision for women is well established in Northamptonshire. There are two women's centres (Northampton and Kettering), accessible by public transport for those in Wellingborough. Two programmes (SHINE women and Healing Trauma) are commissioned through the ROIF and delivered from these locations. Women also access The Good Loaf, in Northampton and Kettering, a bakery café offering apprenticeships and domestic abuse courses to women on probation. Women's champions are in place across all three offices and they meet frequently with offender personality disorder leads who provide welfare and training/coaching support.

⁴ The East of England is one of five polit areas to participate in a new Community Accommodation Service (CAS 3), funded by the Ministry of Justice. This was launched in July 2021 to provide enhanced accommodation support for prison leavers for up to 12 weeks post release.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the delivery of accredited programmes has been felt nationally, with social distancing restrictions resulting in reduced capacity to deliver and backlogs building. In Northamptonshire, accredited programmes are delivered from Northampton and Kettering. Snapshot data provided by the PDU showed that in February 2022 there were 123 Building Better Relationships (BBR) and 99 Thinking Skills Programme (TSP) requirements. Therefore, a total of 222 requirements, 83 of whom were attending a programme (53 attending BBR and 30 attending TSP), 33 had insufficient time to complete, leaving 106, or just over 50 per cent of non-sex-offender programme requirements waiting to start a programme. A proportion of individuals have been instructed to attend a programme, although not commenced due to non-compliance. While the plans to reduce the backlog are encouraging and delivery of BBR has been prioritised due to the risks associated with these cases, waiting lists still remain. In Northampton a larger public venue has been sourced to increase group sizes from six people to 12, including facilitators.

In February 2022, there were 35 active sexual offending programme requirements in the PDU – Horizon (31), iHorizon (two) and New Me Strengths (two). Delivery of Horizon is the PDU priority and 13 participants were attending this programme. One participant had insufficient time to complete, leaving 21 people on probation awaiting allocation. Completion rates for sexual offending behaviour programmes in Northamptonshire are at 65 per cent, which is above the regional completion rate of 58 per cent, although 35 per cent are still not successfully completed.

There has been an extension of independent work placements⁵ for unpaid work, beyond project in a box, which was established during lockdown restrictions. ETE support is in place for unpaid work inductions to promote access to ETE provision, where appropriate to contribute towards the completion of unpaid work hours. Of the 402 unpaid work requirements in Northamptonshire in January 2022, 32 per cent had hours outstanding beyond 12 months. This presents as a challenge for compliance and engagement when instructing people on probation to attend when time has lapsed since sentence.

For accredited programmes and unpaid work, interventions staff provide on-site 'clinics' for support and solutions for those not engaging with requirements. We heard there are additional plans for this to be supported by peer mentors, although practitioners were not familiar with this as routine practice.

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

Information exchange regarding the safety of children and domestic abuse is in place. Processes are straightforward and effective, which is reflected in the court work we inspected. Domestic abuse checks were undertaken, or information was already available prior to the court appearance, in almost three quarters of cases and in a further seven per cent, court staff made enquiries before the case was allocated. Court staff we spoke to were clear of the circumstances in which a domestic abuse check should be made. Where enquiries were made, the police domestic abuse unit responded before the court appearance in 15 of 22 relevant cases and a further two responses were received after sentence but prior to allocation.

⁵ Independent work projects were initially introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic when social restrictions limited the opportunity for group delivery of unpaid work. Initially, project in a box was implemented, but this has since been extended in the East of England for people on probation to work from home, producing products for charities.

The PDU has an active role in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), which operates a rotating chair for the MASH steering group across key partners. Of the court reports we inspected children’s safeguarding enquiries were made in 14 of 20 relevant cases. It was positive to see responses from enquiries returned before the court appearance in all but one case. There are effective processes in place to ensure risk information is exchanged quickly to inform court reports, and staff welcomed a swift exchange of information by telephone call, rather than a protracted impersonal process by email.

Sentencers are well sighted on what The Probation Service offers and a comprehensive regional judicial guide outlining available interventions has been shared with them. Sentencers found this useful to inform decision-making. While probation practitioners and interventions staff were aware of the waiting lists for starting unpaid work and accredited programmes, court staff and sentencers were not. Sentencers commented on the good relationship between themselves and probation practitioners, through day-to-day court activity and regular liaison events.

Where other agencies were working with the person on probation during their sentence, inspectors found that in 32 of 50 relevant cases, this work was coordinated effectively to support the individual’s desistance. The involvement of other agencies to manage and minimise the risk of harm was sufficiently well-coordinated in only 44 per cent of cases. There were no notable variances between community sentences and post-release cases in our inspection scores. In both types of case the focus on offending and desistance is evident, although keeping people safe is an area that requires ongoing attention.

At probation practitioner and CRS-provider level, communication with CRSs is supported through co-location, although contracts require them to be based in Northampton. CRS providers do visit the north of the county, but they are less visible to probation practitioners in Kettering and Wellingborough. We heard that the refer and monitor process does not support effective information exchange and there are differing expectations between probation practitioners and CRS providers about the services provided. This was particularly evident for accommodation providers, who have long waiting lists, and probation practitioners were not always informed of the reasons for this or how to escalate a case requiring intervention.

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

In making a judgement about information and facilities, we take into account the answers to the four questions below. We have assessed that information and facilities insufficiently support a high-quality, personalised and responsive approach for all people on probation and have therefore rated this as ‘Requires improvement’.

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

Northamptonshire PDU shares one quality development officer (QDO) with two other PDUs, which limits the capacity of this resource, although the QDO can be accessed on an ad-hoc basis and provides probation practitioner support and feedback through the complex case pilot which they found beneficial.

Mandatory training expectations are understood by probation practitioners, reviewed in supervision with their managers, and it is expected that completion of training should be signed off before practitioners can move to mixed caseloads. Key learning is communicated via Microsoft Teams' channels, weekly 'need to know emails', team 'huddles', and online training events. The effectiveness of these communications is hampered by workloads and some staff informed us that they were still learning new processes and systems. The business support function provides advice and 'top tips' for probation practitioners, but many spoke of needing to learn how to use the basic tools to support them in their work.

It was positive that 13 out of 16 probation practitioners responding to our survey felt the organisation promotes a culture of learning and continuous improvement; although there is a strong sense among case administrators and SPOs that they do not feel their learning needs are understood and, instead, learn their role through peer support.

The recently established local quality matters board provides a forum to review regional learning priorities alongside the needs of the PDU. This board has met only once but demonstrates an appetite to understand improvements required across the PDU. They are currently working towards the regional quality improvement plan which has just been released, pending an improvement plan specific to Northamptonshire.

We saw examples of diversity data in relation to women being used to inform services and interventions available for women, through the purchase of women's programmes delivered by C2C. Gaps in provision have been identified for a trauma-informed intervention for black men which is being taken to the regional commissioning board. While this is positive, there is a lack of an analysis of diversity data across the PDU to fully inform gaps in provision. The views of people on probation are not collectively gathered to inform service delivery, although there is a newly appointed SPO with engagement of people on probation as an expert role to take this forward.

Learning from serious further offence (SFO) reviews is shared with managers by the head and deputy head of the PDU who attend accountability and learning panels to review key learning. It is encouraging that plans are in place for SFO reviewers to have a more visible presence in offices to dispel some of the myths and fears probation practitioners have around SFO learning.

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

Policies are communicated regionally and at PDU level. They are available on EQuIP⁶ and various Microsoft Teams' channels, which have been set up for staff to raise queries and seek advice from each other and business support. The weekly updates

⁶ EQuIP is the single repository for up-to-date process information for The Probation Service, meaning staff do not have to log into separate systems for other policies.

from the head of PDU provide key headlines of the week, which includes updates on policies, recording advice and progress updates. We heard staff across all grades referencing a 'saturation point' in terms of the amount of information they receive and updates to practice, and many felt unable to keep up.

What was less clear to probation practitioners was the process for referral, information exchange and contractual arrangements for CRS provision.

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

Northamptonshire PDU operates across three offices – Northampton, Wellingborough and Kettering. The Northampton office is wheelchair accessible although there are accessibility issues in Wellingborough and probation practitioners arrange home visits or other alternatives, which we heard can include appointments taking place in the staff car park. Kettering is a small office, with 14 staff and eight desks. Co-location of services is an issue for Kettering, as is management and senior management visibility due to the lack of space.

Of the people on probation we spoke to, 85 per cent answered positively when asked whether the location of appointments have been within a reasonable travelling distance. One in five said they were unable to have private conversations with their probation practitioner when needed. The reasons for this are unclear, although may in part reflect the flexible arrangements in Wellingborough to accommodate people on probation with mobility issues and the blended approach to supervision, which includes contact by telephone where appropriate.

The removal of safety screens in the high-risk rooms in Northampton is a source of concern for staff. Of those who responded to our survey, only seven out of 16 responded positively when asked if enough attention was paid to staff safety.

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

All staff have access to mobile telephones and laptop computers, which promotes flexibility in the way they work, although we heard of many staff working evenings and weekends. Wi-Fi is an issue, especially for CRS providers, who are unable to access IT systems from offices, although some providers had identified a workaround for this.

Performance data is available through a Microsoft Teams channel set up with different permissions to allow the head of PDU, managers, probation practitioners and business support to view performance relevant to their role. Access to live performance and management information is used to manage compliance proactively with performance measures, including identifying and sharing learning where there are data recording issues.

There is a comprehensive understanding of the profile and needs of women, which includes breach and recall rates and breakdown of age, ethnicity, sentence type, risk and needs. This has been shared with women's CRS providers to inform service delivery. This data feeds into the empowering women strategy group who meet bi-monthly, tasked with improving and developing services for women across the region and in each PDU. There is more work to be undertaken to understand the broad range of diversity needs of people on probation in Northamptonshire.

Feedback from people on probation

The regional engaging people on probation action plan was signed off in October 2021. However, there was no evidence of engagement with people on probation within Northamptonshire PDU at the point of inspection. An SPO has been recently appointed, with engaging people on probation allocated as an expert lead role, to implement the regional action plan locally.

User Voice, working with HM Inspectorate of Probation, had contact with 38 people on probation as part of this inspection. Responses were generally positive and 90 per cent of people on probation said they were able to contact probation services when needed, although 20 per cent said they were unable to have conversations with probation practitioners in private. Furthermore, 75 per cent were happy with the support they had received from the probation services.

While our domain two case assessment data suggest that continuity of probation practitioner was maintained in many of the cases we inspected, the impact of multiple probation practitioners was highlighted by an individual who responded to our people on probation survey:

“...I feel like I have to start again every time and it’s frustrating. You never know what the new PO is going to be like. I feel like I have to repeat myself over and over again” and I have to re-live my offence over and over again which can be traumatic. There needs to be a hand-over, so these things don’t have to be said.”

Of the cases we inspected, engagement with people on probation on a case-by-case basis was an area of strength in practice. Within the people on probation survey completed as part of this inspection, 60 per cent said they have been asked for their views about how probation services are run and 40 per cent were undecided.

Diversity and inclusion

The needs of women are well understood and there is a comprehensive statistical breakdown of women on probation in Northamptonshire. Other diversity needs of the caseload in Northamptonshire are less well understood and data around this is underdeveloped. Positively, a trauma-informed intervention for black males is being developed in recognition of this as a gap in provision.

Gaps in mental health provision have been identified by the head of PDU and is something we saw in cases we inspected. There are arrangements in place for mental health treatment requirements and this is promoted as an alternative to custody, especially for women. The community sentence treatment requirement also provides quick access to mental health, although for those people on probation not receiving these interventions through requirements of the sentence, there is a gap. This has been recognised by the head of PDU, who is working with health providers to understand the issue and identify pathways into mental health services.

In Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation’s practitioner survey, 38 per cent of staff required reasonable adjustments and in all but one case, these were put in place.

2. Court work and case supervision

We inspected 42 community sentence cases and 22 post-release supervision cases. We inspected 29 relevant court reports arising from those cases. We examined the quality of assessment, planning, implementation and delivery, and reviewing in each case and spoke to 53 probation practitioners with responsibility for the case supervision. Each of the elements (assessment, planning, implementation and delivery, and reviewing) 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, although this is not rated.

There are straightforward and effective information exchange arrangements in place across Northamptonshire Probation Delivery Unit (PDU). Court staff did not make enquiries with children's safeguarding and/or police domestic abuse units, in only 21 per cent of relevant cases, and the information received was reflected in reports in a good majority. Alongside this we saw attention to victim issues, offending and risk of harm factors being appropriately identified and individuals being involved in the preparation of their reports. Court work was rated as 'Outstanding' and reports provided a strong foundation of good engagement and assessment practice to be built on when the person on probation started their sentence.

Engaging the person on probation in all four elements of case supervision – assessment, planning, implementation and delivery, and reviewing was a strength in practice. We saw a continued focus on offending and desistance in initial assessments and planning activity, although domain two scores demonstrate that the focus in this area reduced in the implementing and reviewing parts of the sentence. While we heard of some innovative initiatives for women and black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals, there are delays for people on probation waiting to start commissioned rehabilitative services (CRSs) and accredited programmes, which undoubtedly impacted negatively in this area.

From the cases we reviewed, practice to keep people safe is an area that requires attention in the PDU. Practice to engage the person on probation and support the individual's desistance is a more positive picture across the four stages of the sentence (assessment, planning and, to a lesser degree, implementation and delivery, and reviewing). There was a stark difference between the positive focus on engagement and reducing offending and the quality of work across all four stages of the sentence, to keep people safe, which was significantly lower. This is a crucial area for the PDU to build on its strengths in engagement and desistance, and extend this to case supervision in relation to victims and multi-agency working to improve practice to keep people safe.

Case supervision

Strengths:

- Effective information exchange arrangements are in place with police domestic abuse units and local authority children’s safeguarding and used by report authors to inform court work, which is rated as outstanding.
- Across all areas of case management, practitioners engaged well with people on probation.
- There was a balance between offence-related and protective factors in initial assessments, which identified and analysed critical offending-related needs.

Areas for improvement:

- Initial assessments, following sentence, do not routinely utilise information provided by other agencies.
- There was insufficient attention paid to the safety of victims in initial assessments and in the implementation and delivery of the sentence.
- People on probation are waiting too long to access commissioned rehabilitative services (CRS) and offending behaviour programmes.
- Effective multi-agency working to keep people safe was seen in only half of the cases we inspected.
- Where there were changes in risk of harm, assessments and plans were actively reviewed to keep people safe in only 17 of 46 relevant cases.

2.1 Court work



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

Outstanding

Our rating⁷ 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?	86%

⁷ The rating for the standard is driven by the score for the key question, which is placed in a rating band.

The court reports we inspected were rated as 'Outstanding'. Of the 29 reports we inspected, 79 per cent were short-format reports completed without an Offender Assessment System (OASys) and 21 per cent were presented orally with a written record available.

Court work is rated as 'Outstanding'. The focus on keeping people safe was evident in court reports, and risk of harm factors and the impact of the offence on victims were both considered in most. Individuals were involved in the preparation of their report, factors linked to offending were appropriately identified and the focus on keeping people safe translated into appropriate sentencing proposals. This provides a strong foundation for probation practitioners allocated the case post-sentence and prepares the person on probation for the start of sentence.

Court staff, including court case administrators, had a clear understanding of the importance of safeguarding enquiries to inform appropriate sentencing decisions and to ensure risk information is available at the point of allocation following sentence. In 72 per cent of court reports domestic abuse checks were undertaken either through checks completed by the report author or existing up-to-date information being already available. In a further seven per cent of court reports we saw domestic abuse checks being undertaken prior to allocation following sentence. When domestic abuse checks were made, responses were received in all but 17 per cent of cases, demonstrating effective information exchange arrangements.

Based on the information available to inspectors we expected to see children's safeguarding enquiries undertaken in 20 cases. Enquiries were made in 14 of them and a response received from children's services in all but one. The process for undertaking enquiries with other agencies at court are effective and generally responded to by police and children's safeguarding swiftly. Court reports were informed by available information in 69 per cent of cases. Court work was rated 'outstanding' and a continued focus on ensuring that court reports take account of safeguarding enquiries is required for this standard to be maintained.

Good practice example

Connor was involved in the court report and his views around offending and proposals were documented. The report considered the impact of the offence on Connor's former partner and children, which was positive. Enquiries were made with the police domestic abuse unit and contact was made with children's services. Information was provided and included in the assessment. The report discusses why certain requirements were unsuitable taking into consideration Connor's individual circumstances. The proposal was appropriate to meet the needs and risks in this case and an outline of how the proposed requirements would achieve this were highlighted in the report.

2.2. Assessment



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

Requires improvement

Our rating⁸ 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?	73%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on the factors linked to offending and desistance?	83%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	47%

Northamptonshire PDU is rated as 'Requires improvement' for assessment. Although our initial assessment was that less than half of cases were sufficient on 'keeping other people safe', this score was within five per cent of a 'requires improvement' rating and HM Inspectorate of Probation's ratings panel judged there to be sufficient evidence to move it into this banding.

We saw strengths in practice in relation to how people on probation were engaged in assessments and the focus on factors linked to offending and desistance was also a strength. The lowest scoring key question related to keeping people safe, which is an area for development in the PDU.

Engagement of people on probation is critical to balanced assessments, informed by an understanding of the needs of the individual and the impact of protected characteristics, and relevant personal circumstances on their ability to engage with the sentence. From the meetings we held across all grades and roles of staff in Northamptonshire we heard a strong sense of teamwork with a focus on 'doing the right thing' by those supervised in the PDU, which is reflected in the focus on engaging with people on probation in the cases we inspected. Overall, we saw people on probation engaged in their sentence in 73 per cent of cases, underpinned by an understanding of their motivation, diversity needs, and their views being accounted for.

Overall, the assessment of factors linked to offending and desistance was sufficient in a large majority of cases. In 81 per cent of cases we saw offending-related factors not only identified, but also analysed, and where inspectors identified existing protective factors to support desistance, practitioners recognised them in 48 of 55 relevant cases. The quality of assessment of offending and desistance is key to being able to balance the strengthening of protective factors with offending needs and for

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.

the person on probation to know that positive areas of their life are recognised. Again, a strength for the PDU.

In terms of keeping people safe, this was the lowest scoring key question and one impacted upon by cases where information was provided by other agencies, primarily children’s safeguarding and domestic abuse responses, but was not adequately considered in assessments. The information exchange arrangements in place in Northamptonshire PDU are impressive and domestic abuse enquiries were made or the information was already available in 83 per cent of cases. Of the 50 cases where inspectors would expect safeguarding checks to be undertaken, the checks were made in 33 of them. However, information from other agencies was not reflected in 44 per cent of the assessments we reviewed, and in 39 per cent of cases the risk to identifiable victims was not analysed. Slightly more positively, where inspectors expected to see an analysis of risk of harm to others, it was seen in 34 out of 57 relevant cases.

Given the strong position of the PDU in terms of information exchange with other agencies, this standard has been rated as ‘Requires improvement’ rather than ‘Inadequate’. The area for focus in Northamptonshire PDU is to now ensure that assessments are routinely informed by information from other agencies and consider victim issues.

2.3. Planning



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

Requires improvement

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

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does planning focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	72%
Does planning focus sufficiently on reducing reoffending and supporting desistance?	72%
Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	48%

Overall, planning has been rated as ‘Requires improvement’. Many of the cases inspected evidenced a focus on engaging people on probation in planning, and plans largely took account of offending-related needs and factors supporting desistance. These two key questions also scored well in assessment, and inspectors were able to see good assessment practice, translating into plans, informed by the person on

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.

probation and addressing offence-related needs. Planning to keep people safe was the lowest scoring of the three key questions, with contingency planning identified as a significant factor influencing this score. Although the lowest score of the three key questions was less than 50%, the ratings panel judged there to be sufficient evidence to use professional discretion to move the rating up to a 'requires improvement'.

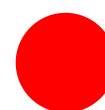
Staff we met with during fieldwork spoke of the importance of engaging with people on probation to involve them in their plans, to identify appropriate interventions and to support them to make positive change. Of the cases we inspected, a reasonable majority focused effectively on engaging the individual in planning. In 75 per cent of cases inspected, the person on probation was meaningfully involved, the impact of personal circumstances on their engagement and compliance was accounted for and their readiness and motivation to engage with the sentence was considered. Where inspectors identified diversity needs, they were considered in 33 out of 51 relevant cases. Of Northamptonshire's caseload, 47 per cent have a declared disability and a routine focus on the broader diverse needs of people on probation was not seen across all protected characteristics.

Plans to address offence-related factors, including prioritising the most critical, was sufficiently reflected in 68 per cent of relevant cases. We saw plans balancing the importance of strengthening protective factors with addressing offence-related needs.

Planning to keep people safe was the lowest scoring key question under this standard. Inspectors expected to see plans to keep people safe in 55 of the cases we inspected and 31 of the plans we reviewed sufficiently addressed risk of harm factors and prioritised the most critical. In 10 of the cases reviewed, we did not agree with the overall risk classification and inspectors concluded that all 10 had been underassessed, with some countersigned by managers. The threshold between low risk and medium risk of harm accounted for most of these cases and as such, planning to keep people safe was not considered by the practitioner, although expected by inspectors.

Effective contingency planning was seen in only 35 per cent of cases, which in part contributed to the overall low score for planning to keep people safe. While not diminishing the importance of effective contingency arrangements to respond to a change in risk factors, there was sufficient evidence of active planning to keep people safe to rate the planning standard as 'requires improvement' rather than 'inadequate'.

2.4. Implementation and delivery



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

Inadequate

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

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.

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Is the sentence or post-custody period implemented effectively with a focus on engaging the person on probation?	78%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support desistance?	61%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?	42%

Northamptonshire PDU is rated as 'Inadequate' for implementation and delivery of the sentence. The lowest scoring area under this standard relates to keeping people safe and we saw this being implemented sufficiently in only 42 per cent of cases.

The theme of good engagement practice in Northamptonshire PDU, seen across assessment and planning, continues into the delivery of the sentence. People on probation in Northamptonshire told us how important it was to have continuity of probation practitioner and where they are assigned to multiple practitioners, this can feel disruptive to their progress. The head of PDU, supported by the regional strategy, has prioritised continuity of case management and, of the cases we inspected, 93 per cent had been assigned to two or fewer probation practitioners since their sentence commenced. This may go some way towards explaining the positive work we saw undertaken by probation practitioners to engage people on probation, supported by a culture among staff to provide a quality service to those they supervise. Practitioners paid attention to diversity issues in 84 per cent of cases and in a large majority, they were flexible to meet the personal circumstances of people on probation to enable them to complete their sentence. Where enforcement action was required, this was taken in 25 of 36 relevant cases.

Northamptonshire PDU is not alone in having to recover the delivery of services and interventions following the Covid-19 pandemic and nationally there are backlogs in accredited programmes and unpaid work. It was encouraging to see measures in place to reduce the backlogs and increase the capacity to deliver requirements in Northamptonshire. In just over half of the cases (55 per cent) inspected, delivered services were sufficient to reduce offending and promote desistance. Levels of contact supported work to reduce offending and support desistance in 63 per cent of cases and were sufficient to manage and monitor risk of harm in 59 per cent. Of the pre-release cases we inspected there was a proportionate level of contact prior to release in 13 of 22 cases. Positively, in all relevant cases assessed as high or very high risk of harm, proportionate pre-release contact was seen.

In terms of keeping people safe, the key areas of concern related to victims, home visits and the coordination of agencies to keep people safe. In addition, key risks were not addressed prior to an individual being released from custody in over half of cases. Attention to victim safety was lacking in 19 of 53 relevant cases.

The ability to undertake home visits has been hampered by restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, but this is an important aspect of risk management, particularly in cases where there are domestic abuse and child safeguarding concerns. Home visits were not undertaken in 59 per cent of cases where we would expect to see them. It is possible that the lack of home visits could be mitigated through visits being undertaken by other agencies, for example children’s social care and the police. However, the effective coordination of other agencies to minimise and manage the risk of harm was seen in only 44 per cent of cases and in many cases, information was not being shared.

Overall, a focus on keeping people safe through implementation and delivery of the sentence was seen in too few cases and fundamental risk management practices to keep victims safe are not being routinely undertaken. This is compounded by the waiting lists for accredited programmes, resulting in delayed access to constructive interventions designed to keep people safe or in some cases, interventions not being delivered at all.

2.5. Reviewing



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

Requires improvement

Our rating¹¹ 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?	73%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting desistance?	61%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	51%

The lowest scoring key question for this standard relates to keeping people safe, which scores 51 per cent, which falls within the 'Requires improvement' rating band. When assessing how cases are reviewed, inspectors consider both the formal written record of a review through completion of an OASys where required, and active reviews undertaken, through engagement with the person on probation and liaison with other agencies, documented in other case records.

¹¹ 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 terms of engaging people on probation, we expect to see individuals being actively involved in a review of their progress, with adjustments being made where factors are identified that may impact on their ability to comply with the sentence. Individuals were meaningfully involved in reviews of their progress in 72 per cent of cases and adjustments were made to the planned work in 33 of 46 relevant cases. It was encouraging to note that three quarters of the people on probation we spoke to said they were happy with the support they had received from probation services.

Throughout the lifetime of a sentence changes to offending-related factors should be monitored and reviewed through engaging with the person on probation and other agencies working with them. Where required, adjustments should be made to the planned work to respond to these changes. It was encouraging to see reviews informed by other agencies delivering the sentence plan in 36 of 52 relevant cases and attention being paid to protective factors to support desistance. However, this practice was not routinely embedded in the cases we inspected and the focus on supporting desistance was sufficient in too few reviews.

Where there were changes to risk of harm, there was a lack of active reviewing to inform risk assessments and plans to keep people safe. We saw this in only 27 per cent of cases. The lack of effective multi-agency coordination to deliver the sentence has already been noted. The impact of this was seen in reviewing and 24 of 53 cases were informed by other agencies involved in managing the person on probation's risk of harm. Additionally, in too many cases, people on probation were not involved in reviewing risk of harm factors. When other agencies and people on probation are involved in reviews of the risk of harm, this can provide well-informed assessments of ongoing risk issues and the strategies required to keep people safe. We saw this in the following case example:

Good practice example

During an appointment with his probation practitioner Oscar disclosed a previous non-recorded sexual offence against a child. The practitioner discussed the case with a manager, who subsequently reassigned Oscar to a probation practitioner trained to deliver sexual offending interventions. Children's safeguarding enquiries were made, and an unannounced joint home visit was undertaken by the probation practitioner and the officer trained in the management of sexual or violent offenders. Relevant disclosures were made to those residing with Oscar and contact with children's safeguarding was followed up for assessment. A formal written review was completed, including an updated risk assessment and a reviewed plan, which demonstrated how agencies were working together to keep people safe.

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?	52%

We do not currently rate the Outcomes standard but provide this data for information and benchmarking purposes only. During fieldwork we spoke to many staff across all grades, who were clearly committed to delivering a quality service to people on probation in Northamptonshire. However, frustrations were expressed by staff and CRS providers.

Taking into account the context in which staff are operating, it is testament to them that early outcomes demonstrate reasonable progress has been made in just over half of the cases inspected in Northamptonshire. Staff spoke about, and we recognise, the challenges of the last two years, working to deliver probation services during a pandemic, adapting to exceptional delivery models and more recently, returning to offices, albeit in a phased way. Additionally; in June 2021 probation services unified and some staff have relocated offices; there have been changes made to processes to support people in their work; and at the time of our inspection, the unified service was nine months old. This is relatively early in such a significant change programme and we heard staff describe themselves as 'fatigued' but committed to their role. Engagement of people on probation was the highest scoring area across sentence management, evidenced in domain two data, which is reflected in the outcome data where compliance was sufficient in 56 per cent of cases. Of the 25 cases where accommodation was linked to offending, improvements were seen in 14 and of the 12 cases where education, training and employment was linked to offending, improvements were seen in seven. Overall, we saw improvements in those factors most closely linked to offending in 30 per cent of cases (three percent fully and 27 per cent mostly). A reduction in factors most closely related to risk of harm was seen in too few cases. Of the 64 cases we inspected 51 of them had not been charged or convicted of a further offence and in 21 per cent of cases there had been a reduction in offending. There is some way to go to demonstrate reasonable progress across the Northamptonshire caseload across all outcome measures.

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 Northamptonshire PDU in respect of the relevant recommendations.

Recommendation

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

Inspection findings:

Some progress, evidenced through enhanced information exchange, although more attention is needed to ensure that information gathered informs assessments and the work undertaken to keep victims safe. **Some progress.**

Recommendation

Ensure action is taken to protect victims in all cases, including those assessed as medium ROSH.

Inspection findings:

Further work is required in this area to improve consistency in practice to manage the risk of harm to others. **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:

Of the court reports we inspected, 81 per cent considered the impact of the offence on known or identifiable victims.

This is supported by effective and swift information exchange between report authors, the multi-agency safeguarding hub and the police to inform the assessment of victim issues presented to the court. **Sufficient progress.**

Recommendation

Ensure delivery of interventions (especially those to be delivered as part of a RAR) is consistent across the organisation.

Inspection findings:

Approved practitioner toolkits have been implemented in the region and structured interventions were being rolled out during fieldwork. This should improve consistency in the delivery of interventions, although it is too early to comment on how this is being implemented. **Some progress.**

Recommendation

Improve the use of management information, intelligence and data to drive service planning, delivery and commissioning

Inspection findings:

Management information is readily available through Microsoft Teams' platforms and we saw this being used to inform commissioning decisions. Further work is required to use this information to understand the availability and accessibility of commissioned rehabilitative services at PDU level. **Some progress.**

Recommendation

Improve the coordination and delivery of resettlement services to increase the likelihood of successful reintegration for released prisoners

Inspection findings:

The resettlement model has been implemented in the region and commissioned rehabilitative services are available for those serving custodial sentences. CAS 3 has been used effectively to support those at risk of homelessness on their release. The short sentence function is yet to be established. **Some progress.**

Recommendation

Ensure that all premises and facilities are accessible and provide a safe environment for individuals under probation supervision and staff.

Inspection findings:

The probation office in Northampton is accessible, as is the Kettering office, although smaller in size. Wellingborough is not wheel-chair accessible. Only 44 per cent of staff, who responded to our survey, felt that sufficient attention was paid to their safety. 85 per cent of people on probation said the location of their probation appointments were within a reasonable travelling distance for them. **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 data¹²

Total staff headcount (full-time equivalent) (FTE))	152
Total number of senior probation officers (SPOs)	10
Total number of probation officers (POs) (FTE)	56
Total number of probation service officers (PSOs) (FTE)	59
Vacancy rate (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total staff headcount)	0%
Vacancy rate of SPO grade only (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total number of required SPO posts)	20%
Vacancy rate of PO grade only (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total number of required PO posts)	0%
Vacancy rate of PSO grade only (total number of unfilled posts as a percentage of total number of required PSO posts)	28%
Sickness absence rate (average days lost in previous 12 months for all staff)	8.6
Staff attrition (percentage of all staff leaving in 12-month period)	5%
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)	0%
Staff attrition PSO grade only (percentage of all PSO-grade staff leaving in 12-month period)	9%

¹² Data supplied by The Probation Service.

Caseload and workload data¹²

Average caseload per PO (FTE)	27.2
Average caseload per PSO (FTE)	38.8
Workload management tool (WMT) average per PO	97%
WMT average per PSO	77%

Inspection workload data¹³

Proportion of POs (or equivalent) in this PDU describing workload as unmanageable	86%
Proportion of PSOs (or equivalent) in this PDU describing workload as unmanageable	20%

¹³ 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?¹⁴	
Does the information and advice draw sufficiently on available sources of information including child safeguarding and domestic abuse information?	69%
Is the individual meaningfully involved in the preparation of the report, and are their views considered?	97%
Does the advice consider factors related to the likelihood of reoffending?	97%
Does the advice consider factors related to risk of harm? **	86%
Does the advice consider the individual's motivation and readiness to change?	83%
Does the advice consider the individual's diversity and personal circumstances?	86%
Does the advice consider the impact of the offence on known or identifiable victims?	62%
Is an appropriate proposal made to court? **	93%
Is there a sufficient record of the advice given, and the reasons for it?	93%

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

¹⁴ This question is only answered where the PDU has prepared a court report in the 12 month period before the inspection fieldwork.

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?	73%
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?	62%
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?	75%
Is the person on probation meaningfully involved in their assessment, and are their views taken into account?	79%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on the factors linked to offending and desistance?	
Does assessment identify and analyse offending-related factors?	81%
Does assessment identify the strengths and protective factors of the person on probation? **	77%
Does assessment draw sufficiently on available sources of information?	81%
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?	54%
Does assessment draw sufficiently on available sources of information, including past behaviour and convictions, and involve other agencies where appropriate?	56%
Does assessment analyse any specific concerns and risks related to actual and potential victims? **	50%

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?	75%
Does planning take sufficient account of the diversity factors of the individual which may affect engagement and compliance? **	52%
Does planning take sufficient account of the personal circumstances of the individual which may affect engagement and compliance? **	75%
Does planning take sufficient account of the readiness and motivation of the person on probation to change which may affect engagement and compliance?	75%
Does planning set out how all the requirements of the sentence or licence/post-sentence supervision will be delivered within the available timescales?	75%
Does planning set a level, pattern and type of contact sufficient to engage the individual and to support the effectiveness of specific interventions?	79%
Does planning focus sufficiently on reducing reoffending and supporting desistance?	
Does planning sufficiently reflect offending-related factors and prioritise those which are most critical? *	68%
Does planning build on the individual's strengths and protective factors, utilising potential sources of support? **	60%
Does planning set out the services most likely to reduce reoffending and support desistance?	68%

Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	
Does planning sufficiently address risk of harm factors and prioritise those which are most critical? **	49%
Does planning set out the necessary constructive and/or restrictive interventions to manage the risk of harm? **	52%
Does planning make appropriate links to the work of other agencies involved with the person on probation and any multi-agency plans? **	48%
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?	73%
Is sufficient focus given to maintaining an effective working relationship with the person on probation, taking into account their diversity needs?	84%
Are sufficient efforts made to enable the individual to complete their sentence, including flexibility to take appropriate account of their personal circumstances?	91%
Are risks of non-compliance identified and addressed in a timely fashion to reduce the need for enforcement actions? **	43%
Are enforcement actions taken when appropriate? **	39%
Are sufficient efforts made to re-engage the individual after enforcement actions or recall? **	38%

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?	55%
Wherever possible, does the delivery of services build upon the individual's strengths and enhance protective factors? **	66%
Is the involvement of other organisations in the delivery of services sufficiently well-coordinated? * **	50%
Are key individuals in the life of the person on probation engaged where appropriate to support their desistance? * **	33%
Is the level and nature of contact sufficient to reduce reoffending and support desistance?	63%
Are local services engaged to support and sustain desistance during the sentence and beyond? * **	48%
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? **	59%
Is sufficient attention given to protecting actual and potential victims? **	30%
Is the involvement of other agencies in managing and minimising the risk of harm sufficiently well-coordinated? * **	44%
Are key individuals in the life of the person on probation engaged where appropriate to support the effective management of risk of harm? * **	34%
Are home visits undertaken where necessary to support the effective management of risk of harm? * **	31%

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?	20%
Post-custody cases only: Did the community offender manager address the key resettlement or desistance needs before release?	19%
Post-custody cases only: Did the community offender manager address key risk of harm needs before release?	13%

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? **	52%
Is the person on probation meaningfully involved in reviewing their progress and engagement?	72%
Are written reviews completed as appropriate as a formal record of actions to implement the sentence? **	45%
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? *	58%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on building on the strengths and enhancing the protective factors of the person on probation? **	50%
Is reviewing informed by the necessary input from other agencies working with the person on probation? **	56%
Are written reviews completed as appropriate as a formal record of the progress towards desistance? **	44%

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? **	27%
Is reviewing informed by the necessary input from other agencies involved in managing the risk of harm? **	38%
Is the person on probation (and, where appropriate, are key individuals in their life) meaningfully involved in reviewing the risk of harm? * **	38%
Are written reviews completed as appropriate as a formal record of the management of the risk of harm? **	37%

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?	30%
Has there been a reduction in factors most closely related to risk of harm to others? **	29%
Has there been a reduction in offending?	21%

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)