



HM Inspectorate  
of Probation

An inspection of probation services in:

**Northamptonshire PDU**

The Probation Service – East of England region

HM Inspectorate of Probation, July 2024



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## Acknowledgements

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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

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HM Inspectorate of Probation last inspected Northamptonshire Probation Delivery Unit (PDU) in 2022. We have since introduced an updated inspection methodology from autumn 2023, meaning that direct comparison to previous findings is not possible. The PDU will undoubtedly be disappointed to receive a rating of 'Inadequate' following this inspection, with insufficient progress made against several of the recommendations made on the last occasion.

Leaders were realistic that despite a clear vision for the PDU, staff vacancy rates, high workloads and poor-quality estates meant that delivery of the vision was an ambition rather than a reality at the point of inspection.

Inspectors heard several examples of good-quality work with partnerships to develop innovation and close gaps in some elements of service delivery. There was particular emphasis on young Black, Asian and minority ethnic males and people on probation subject to multi-agency management. An increased focus on engaging people on probation was also evident since the last inspection.

Unfortunately, in too many cases that we inspected, the quality of casework was insufficient. This was in part due to ineffective mechanisms for sharing key information with partner agencies. Leaders were working to improve this position; however, it was concerning that even when in receipt of relevant information it was not used consistently to inform the assessment and management of risk. An enhanced focus on getting the basics right is required to drive improvement in service delivery.

Although staffing figures had improved in the preceding 12 months, the PDU had vacancies across all operational and administrative grades. At the time of our inspection the vacancy rate for Probation Officers (POs) was 40 per cent, with the impact of this exacerbated by sickness absence and vacancies in support roles. Consequently, workloads remained too high, and staff spoke of feeling overwhelmed and uncertain about what to prioritise. This had detrimental implications for effective risk management, attendance at training and levels of management oversight.

Use of, and communication with, commissioned rehabilitative services (CRS) and other local service provision was inconsistent. Despite some encouraging areas of innovation, outcomes for people on probation in Northamptonshire were poor.

Estates across the PDU did not support delivery of a modern, responsive and high-quality service and require significant national support to improve. This needed urgent action.

Notwithstanding the challenges faced in the PDU, many practitioners spoke positively about their roles, their teams and the level of support received. A renewed focus on the quality of casework, staff development and management oversight will be key to improving service delivery in Northamptonshire.



**Martin Jones CBE**  
HM Chief Inspector of Probation

# Ratings

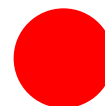
## Northamptonshire

Fieldwork started: 11 March 2024

Score **02/21**

### Overall rating

Rating



### 1. Organisational arrangements and activity

P 1.1 Leadership

Requires improvement



P 1.2 Staffing

Inadequate



P 1.3 Services

Requires improvement



### 2. Service delivery

P 2.1 Assessment

Inadequate



P 2.2 Planning

Inadequate



P 2.3 Implementation and delivery

Inadequate



P 2.4 Reviewing

Inadequate



## Recommendations

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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.

### **Northamptonshire PDU should:**

1. ensure that Northamptonshire PDU has sufficient staffing resources in place to deliver a high-quality, personalised and responsive service for all people on probation
2. ensure that strategic priorities are clearly communicated and understood by probation practitioners and middle managers
3. ensure domestic abuse and safeguarding information is complete and analysed sufficiently to inform the quality of assessment, planning and management of people on probation
4. ensure that work is undertaken with other agencies to manage child safeguarding and domestic abuse, such as the police and children's social care services, to ensure that actual and potential victims are sufficiently protected
5. ensure middle managers have sufficient capacity to provide the appropriate level of oversight according to the needs of staff members and casework in the team
6. improve the use of interventions and services to manage the risk of harm and support the desistance of people on probation
7. ensure all staff receive the necessary training to undertake their roles.

## Background

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We conducted fieldwork in Northamptonshire PDU over a period of two weeks, beginning 11 March 2024. We inspected 45 community orders and 25 releases on licence from custody where sentences and licences had commenced during two separate weeks, between 14 August 2023 and 20 August 2023 and 28 August 2023 and 03 September 2023. We also conducted 66 interviews with probation practitioners.

Northamptonshire is one of eight PDUs in the East of England region of The Probation Service. The head of service has been in post since June 2021 and is supported by a deputy head of service. The PDU is currently operating in amber under the national Prioritisation Framework (PF)<sup>1</sup> meaning that some activity has been deprioritised. This national guidance is produced by The Probation Service to enable PDUs to manage demand where staff capacity is low. At the point of inspection announcement, there were 149 staff working in the PDU across all grades, representing a 22 per cent increase from 122 staff over the preceding 12 months. Whilst this was a positive increase, there remained vacancies at all grades and this position was compounded by a recent increase in sickness rates that was not reflected in published figures.

The PDU operates from three office locations – Northampton, Wellingborough and Kettering. There are three local courts, with staff managed within the PDU: Northamptonshire magistrates' court, Wellingborough magistrates' court, and Northampton Crown Court. The presence of three local prisons – HM Prisons Rye Hill, Onley and Five Wells – has resource implications for the PDU.

The PDU is aligned with North Northamptonshire Council and West Northamptonshire Council. The county has a population of approximately 785,200 people and comprises rural and urban areas. Eighty-six per cent of the local population in West Northamptonshire identifies as white, with this rising to 90 per cent in the north of the county. The demography of the caseload supervised within the PDU is slightly under-representative of the local community, with eight per cent of people on probation identifying as from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background.

The total caseload of the East of England region at the point of inspection announcement was 20,184<sup>2</sup>, with Northamptonshire PDU comprising 1,297 people on community sentences and 648 people on post-release supervision. There were a further 666 cases in the custodial estate.<sup>3</sup>

A range of CRS were delivered across the PDU: Interventions Alliance are responsible for accommodation and education, training and employment services. Nacro delivers personal wellbeing services, and commenced delivery of the finance, benefit and debt contract in November 2023. St Giles Wise Group subcontract local women's service provision to C2C Social Action. Change, Grow, Live (known locally as Substance to Solutions or S2S) provide dependency and recovery services.

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<sup>1</sup> Prioritising Probation Framework – Post-pandemic tool to help regions adapt to how they deliver probation services locally according to numbers of available staff.

<sup>2</sup> East of England organisational data.

<sup>3</sup> Northamptonshire PDU data.

# 1. Organisational arrangements and activity

## P 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

The head of service had a clear vision for the PDU to deliver a high-quality service focused on public protection and positive change for people on probation in Northamptonshire. Staffing and resource issues meant that realising the vision in practice had proven challenging. This was reflected in the service delivery data across all four standards being rated 'Inadequate'. In considering the leadership demonstrated across the PDU, an overall rating of 'Requires improvement' has been evidenced against our standards.

### Strengths:

- The head of service was considered approachable and visible across sentence management teams. Limitations to estates in Kettering meant that this was challenging but efforts by the deputy head of service to be increasingly present at that site were appreciated by staff.
- The delivery plan was aligned with regional and national priorities and set clear targeted actions to deliver services. Risks to delivery were understood and monitored through the PDU risk register.
- Partnership arrangements were strong, with the service being well represented at key strategic meetings. Stakeholders valued contributions made by the head of service to these forums, and we heard several examples of effective joint working to address delivery gaps and develop innovative services. Examples included the 'Safety Box' to address serious violence linked to gangs and a mentoring and advocacy programme for Black and Asian males.
- In response to staff feedback that serious further offence reviewing processes felt 'blaming' and caused anxiety, PDU leaders had adopted a 'fishbone analysis' approach locally. Feedback was positive, with the forum described as a "safe space for open discussion".
- Staff we spoke to who declared a disability reported high levels of support from local leaders to undertake their roles effectively. Of those respondents to our staff survey who required reasonable adjustments, nine out of twelve confirmed that these had been provided.
- The PDU had significantly improved work to engage people on probation since the last inspection. Innovative activities included reverse mentoring of senior staff, representation on recruitment panels and inclusion in key sentence management forums such as lifer panels.

- The PDU shared diversity information and data with partners to improve service provision for people on probation. Examples included the development of a joint race action plan with police and Youth Justice Service (YJS) colleagues and working closely with the regional health and justice coordinator to address gaps in continuity of care for those leaving custody with a health need.

**Areas for improvement:**

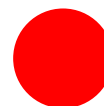
- The PDU had been in amber status on the PF since June 2022. Despite efforts to simplify the expectations of the framework for staff through the production of the 'amber plan on a page' there remained a lack of clarity from practitioners about what to prioritise.
- Despite a clear governance structure in place translating national and regional strategic expectations at a local level, this was not reflected consistently in frontline delivery. We saw limited evidence that managers consistently held staff to account for delivery against required standards.
- The quality of casework inspected across all four service delivery standards was inadequate. Work to keep people safe was poor and there were inconsistencies in the quality of engagement and desistance activity.
- Internal audit data evidenced deficits in various practice areas. These were all mirrored by our inspection findings indicating that improvements were required in the way that the PDU responded to such information.
- A substantial backlog of Northamptonshire Police domestic abuse intelligence responses presented a significant challenge for the PDU. There were approximately 400 responses outstanding, with the number of requests having increased by 43 per cent in 2023, and a further 22 per cent in January 2024. PDU leaders had submitted a business case for probation access to police databases but at the time of inspection this had yet to be resolved.
- Estates across the PDU were unfit for purpose. Many of the issues identified had featured in the last HM Inspectorate of Probation inspection report in 2022. Issues were well understood by PDU leaders who had submitted a business case, supported by the regional Business Strategy and Change team, to influence the national estates strategy. However, improvements were not within the gift of the PDU to resolve despite causing significant implications for service delivery. Renovations in Northampton had caused protracted disruption. Staff lacked clarity about the impact on reception and high-risk spaces which resulted in anxiety.
- Wellingborough was an old building with significant pest and maintenance issues and was not accessible for staff with mobility considerations.
- Kettering staff were based in local authority premises. There was insufficient space and managers lacked privacy to undertake sensitive work. Inspectors were concerned that risks associated with the shared reception space were not satisfactorily assessed or mitigated. Inspectors were told that inadequate interview space resulted in some unplanned appointments being conducted in the car park. This was not sanctioned by leaders, and staff had been encouraged to report incidents linked to health and safety via the appropriate channels. However, under-reporting of such incidents was noted in the business plan and was potentially distorting the scale of this issue.



- The PDU response to dealing with staff complaints was inconsistent. Staff we spoke to were satisfied with management responses to issues they had raised. However, five out of 27 respondents to our staff survey indicated that they had experienced bullying, harassment, or emotional abuse from a colleague within the last three months, and not all had felt able to raise the issue. Of those that had raised issues, none felt that sufficient action had been taken.
- Despite clear messaging by PDU leaders there were several examples of practice that did not align with that messaging. Examples included adherence to the PF and to health and safety expectations as well as attendance at training.

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## P 1.2. Staffing



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

Inadequate

Inspectors noted some minor improvements in vacancy rates and caseloads in Northamptonshire. However, PO vacancy rates remained particularly acute and workloads were too high across all grades. This contributed to a concerning lack of priority being given by staff to their own development and a tendency to shift focus away from public protection activity. Managers did not have sufficient capacity or confidence to hold staff to account for delivery, and this was reflected in the quality of the casework we inspected. This has resulted in an overall rating for staff of 'Inadequate'.

### Strengths:

- Many staff told us how much they enjoyed their jobs and spoke of high levels of support from peers, managers and senior leaders across the PDU.
- Of those who responded to our User Voice survey, 71 per cent said they had a good relationship with their probation practitioner and more than three quarters felt that staff treated them fairly.
- Despite significant vacancy and sickness rates at senior administrator grade, business managers were working hard to provide line management support for case administrators.
- Leaders were responsive when deploying often scarce resources to meet demand. Examples included additional Probation Services Officer (PSO) support in the court team and the YJS, as well as efforts to reduce demand on the Kettering team by sending some cases to the Wellingborough office.
- Attrition rates had reduced across the PDU.
- The PDU made excellent use of 15 peer mentors to support people on probation. Mentors received relevant training as well as bi-monthly supervision.

### Areas for improvement:

- At the point of inspection announcement, the number of staff in post against target staffing figures had increased across all grades during the previous 12 months. However, as the service delivery casework scores indicate, these improvements had not had the desired impact on casework quality.
- Vacancies at PO grade were particularly acute at the time of our inspection, with just 60 per cent of target staff in post.
- Average caseloads had improved over the last 12 months with POs holding an average of 40 cases, and PSOs an average of 39 cases; however, only eight out of 27 respondents to our staff survey and 16 out of 42 practitioners we interviewed said their workload was manageable.

- Organisational data indicated that practitioner sickness absence in the PDU was slightly lower than the regional average. However, absence rates had increased in the 12 months prior to inspection with the situation particularly acute amongst the PO grades. This had resulted in high levels of 'caretaking' that was not fully represented in workload management data.
- Of the 27 respondents to our staff survey, 22 felt that the PDU had a culture of learning and continuous improvement. However, attendance at required classroom training was low, with just 43 per cent of eligible staff having completed training to work with people convicted of sexual offences, for example.
- Completion rates were higher for required e-learning. However, we saw limited evidence that this improved practice, and staff reported limited engagement in this style of delivery.
- There were 30 Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) trainees in the PDU at the point of inspection. Until July 2023, one Senior Probation Officer (SPO) was responsible for managing approximately half of this geographically dispersed staff group, with others managed by sentence management SPOs. Whilst additional resource is now in place, management of high numbers of trainees remained challenging. We heard from some PQiPs that support and oversight of their work had been insufficient, Practice Tutor Assessor support was often remote, and several felt ill-prepared to manage increasingly complex cases.
- Although 18 out of 27 respondents to our staff survey told us that they received regular supervision and that it enhanced the quality of their work, we saw limited evidence that this was enhancing the quality of delivery in the cases we inspected.
- Management oversight was insufficient, ineffective or absent in 80 per cent of the cases we inspected. We saw examples of managers countersigning assessments that were poor quality and lacked key information or a focus on public protection.
- Newer managers were expected to access a regional management training package; however, many told us that the sequencing of this training combined with their workloads meant that they had been unable to prioritise attendance. This resulted in "learning on the job" and a lack of confidence in key tasks including management oversight, case allocation and human resource processes.
- Middle managers each had several lead responsibilities. Spans of control and overall workload resulted in limitations in the development of some of these leads, with some managers having to undertake work outside of their contracted hours. This reduced their ability to scrutinise relevant data or develop links with their partnership counterparts.
- Recent changes to the End of Custody Supervised Licence scheme were causing difficulties for staff managing released prisoners. Leaders were awaiting data to assess the impact of these national changes.

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### P 1.3. Services



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

Requires improvement

Services for people on probation in Northamptonshire were rated as 'Requires improvement'. Inspectors were encouraged by some areas of innovation; however, operational delivery and demand was not consistent, and this had a detrimental impact on the quality of service provision.

#### Strengths:

- Integrated Offender Management (IOM) arrangements across Northamptonshire were functioning effectively. Relationships between practitioner and police counterparts were strong, and communication at all stages of an individual's sentence was effective.
- The PDU was working closely with Northamptonshire Police and other key partners to develop innovative data-sharing practices. The 'Qlik database' combined police and probation data sets about IOM nominals to inform decision-making about this cohort.
- Strategic and operational relationships with the YJS were effective. Due to staffing constraints, the PDU was unable to deploy a seconded PO into the YJS. It was, however, in the process of identifying a PSO resource to support delivery and had made a financial contribution to the YJS to enable direct employment of a PO.
- Level two and three multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) were well embedded across the PDU. Attendance and contributions from practitioners, victim liaison officers and partners were positive, and there was effective joint working to manage the risk posed by complex cases.
- To address accommodation barriers for MAPPA nominals, the PDU had secured funding for two properties for this cohort, with scope to extend this provision to a third. Grant funding had also secured tenancy support workers to enhance this provision and increase the likelihood of successful tenancies.
- A PDU practitioner was instrumental in sourcing a Trauma in Disguise pilot for black males under the age of 30. Academic evaluation of the pilot supported the imminent expansion of the intervention across the East of England and into Kent, Surrey and Sussex.
- Agreement had been secured to broaden delivery of Drug Rehabilitation Requirements to those misusing cannabis in addition to class A substances.

- At the point of inspection, there were a high number (180) of mental health treatment requirements (MHTRs) active in the PDU. The Community Sentence Treatment Requirement Steering Group chaired by the head of service had secured funding from NHS England to deliver MHTRs for men who also had a substance misuse issue. This addressed a gap in provision for males with dual diagnosis.
- Successful completion rates for programmes at the point of inspection announcement were 83 per cent for those convicted of a sexual offence, and 41 per cent for those convicted of other offences, with both figures having improved from the previous 12-month period.
- Most respondents to our User Voice survey (21 out of 29) felt that the distance they were required to travel to attend services and programmes was reasonable.
- Sentencers were very positive about the service provided by court-based probation staff. They were well informed by the court SPO about options available for sentencing and probation resourcing in the PDU.

#### **Areas for improvement:**

- Of those who responded to our User Voice survey, 29 out of 65 indicated that they required access to services. Only 15 of those agreed that probation had helped them to access relevant services. Just 12 people considered the waiting time to access services to have been reasonable.
- Estates issues at Kettering meant that co-location of partner agencies and delivery of interventions was not possible, resulting in a variable offer for people on probation across the PDU.
- Although practitioners interviewed during our case review largely felt that there was a sufficient range of services available for people on probation, data from inspected cases indicated that the implementation and delivery of services supported desistance effectively in only 21 per cent of cases and supported the safety of other people effectively in only 27 per cent of cases.
- Three quarters of staff that we interviewed described effective working relationships with other agencies to manage risk of harm. However, the PDU had not maximised positive strategic and operational relationships with police and safeguarding partners to establish effective arrangements for the sharing and analysis of vital risk information. The quality of overnight arrest and domestic abuse call out intelligence from police was variable and requests for further details could be delayed by up to two months. Processes implemented to obtain child safeguarding information were inconsistently applied.
- Despite regular co-location of Management of Sexual or Violent Offender (MSOVO) officers in PDU teams, we saw several examples where liaison with MSOVO officers was insufficient.
- Despite positive strategic relationships between probation leaders and CRS service managers, CRS were not offered in 27 out of 58 relevant cases we inspected. Providers told us that despite efforts to communicate effectively, there was a lack of clarity for practitioners about when and how to refer people on probation for CRS.
- Women's provision was insufficient, and delivery was inconsistent across the PDU. The co-location of partner agencies and probation practitioners worked

well at the Northampton site but was less well developed elsewhere. Recruitment and retention of staff was an issue for C2C Social Action which resulted in difficulties delivering aspects of the contract.

- Substance misuse service delivery was being adversely affected by operational communication issues between the PDU and S2S. We inspected numerous cases where liaison with S2S was insufficient to inform practitioners' understanding of levels of engagement and compliance with this provider.
- Our case inspection identified several cases where MAPPA screening had not been completed. There was a backlog of almost 200 MAPPA level one discussions in the PDU.
- The delivery of toolkits was not always driven by risk considerations as per the PF.
- Sentencers expressed concern about inconsistent quality of reports completed by sessional staff. They also reported significant delays in the provision of pre-sentence reports.

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## Feedback from people on probation

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User Voice, working with HM Inspectorate of Probation, surveyed people on probation in Northamptonshire. They completed 20 online surveys and 46 face-to-face surveys. A further four people contributed to the evaluation via in-depth interviews but did not complete a survey. Of respondents surveyed, 83 per cent were male and 14 per cent were female, which was broadly representative of the caseload in Northamptonshire. Fifty-six per cent of respondents had spent time in custody and 35 per cent were on a community sentence, whilst nine per cent were unsure of their sentence type. Of those people who engaged with User Voice, 14 per cent were from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic background, which was a slight overrepresentation.

- In spite of high workloads and competing priorities for staff in Northamptonshire, people on probation generally felt they had good working relationships with their practitioner and 73 per cent said they could contact them when necessary. Eighty-three per cent of survey respondents said they understood what was expected of them whilst on probation.

*“My [officer] has been very supportive and understanding and has listened to me. They treat me as a person not a case number.”*

- Eighty per cent of respondents stated that more often than not their appointments started on time and, despite the issues we identified with estates in the PDU, the majority felt that appointments were within a reasonable travelling distance. Some people on probation had been transferred from the Kettering office to the Wellingborough office.
- 85 per cent of respondents knew how to raise a complaint should they need to do so and 65 per cent felt that probation had asked for their views about being on supervision. This was reflective of an increased emphasis on engaging people on probation within the PDU since the last inspection, and inspectors noted enthusiasm to continue the development of this work.
- Inspectors heard from a peer mentor who described their role as an opportunity to give something back to the community and develop new skills. Responsibilities included facilitating coffee mornings, supporting those on release from custody, and undertaking one-to-one mentoring sessions in the community. They reported feeling valued by the organisation and had seized the opportunity to engage in reverse mentoring with a senior leader from the region.
- Fewer than half (46 per cent) of respondents felt that their appointments were useful in helping them and their rehabilitation. Some practitioners told us that workload pressures meant they could not always spend an adequate amount of time with people on probation.

*“There is no direct goal and no plan.”*

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## Diversity and inclusion

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Leaders were sighted on diversity considerations for staff and people on probation and were working with partners to address disparities in service provision for several minority groups. Inspectors were not satisfied however, that practitioners consistently considered the protected characteristics and personal circumstances of people on probation to maximise engagement.

### Strengths:

- In the cases we inspected, there was evidence that 87 per cent of people on probation had been asked about diversity circumstances at the start of their period of supervision and 70 per cent of respondents to our User Voice survey stated that their probation practitioner took the time to understand their personal needs during induction.
- Sufficient efforts were made to enable the individual to complete their sentence, including flexibility to take appropriate account of their personal circumstances in 76 per cent of cases.
- Seventy-five per cent of the court reports we inspected considered diversity and personal circumstances.
- Ten per cent of staff identified as being part of a Black, Asian or minority ethnic group, which was a slight overrepresentation against the eight per cent of those supervised that identify as non-white British.
- As part of MHTR delivery, the PDU had commissioned Northamptonshire Healthcare Foundation Trust to undertake ADHD assessments for those subject to this requirement. This will help to alleviate the six-year waiting list for NHS evaluations locally.
- The PDU was a pilot site for the delivery of a structured intervention for men on probation of an Eastern European background. This intervention aimed to support reintegration into the community.

### Areas for improvement:

- Only 49 per cent of assessments analysed the protected characteristics of people on probation, with just 53 per cent of plans taking sufficient account of the impact that personal circumstances might have on engagement and compliance. We saw examples in cases we inspected where language, trauma and discrimination, cultural considerations, literacy issues and childcare were not adequately considered.
- Sufficient focus was given to maintaining an effective working relationship and considering diversity needs when delivering the sentence in only just over half of cases we inspected (59 per cent).
- In our case inspections we saw examples of a letter being sent in English rather than the individual's own language and several instances where

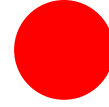


interpreters were required but not provided in key sessions such as assessment and planning discussions.

- In some key aspects, the quality of work with women was poorer than for men on probation.

## 2. Service delivery

### P 2.1. Assessment



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

Our rating<sup>4</sup> for assessment is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions and is driven by the lowest score:

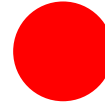
Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does assessment focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?	51%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on the factors linked to offending and desistance?	67%
Does assessment focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	16%

- Where we saw positive examples of people on probation being engaged in their assessment, they were actively involved in exploring personal circumstances and potential barriers to change. Practitioners in Northamptonshire analysed motivation and readiness to comply in 79 per cent of cases we inspected.
- However, less than half of assessments sufficiently analysed the protected characteristics of those being supervised. We saw examples where neurodiversity, health needs and cultural factors were not adequately considered. Some practitioners we spoke to described a lack of confidence in having these discussions with people on probation.
- Assessment of those subject to licence was of consistently better quality than community sentences. This was particularly evident in relation to engagement.
- Assessment of desistance was the strongest area of practice across the service delivery standards. Seventy-one per cent of the assessments we inspected sufficiently identified and analysed offending-related factors and two thirds drew sufficiently on available sources of information, including previous assessments.

<sup>4</sup> The rating for the standard is driven by the score for the key question, which is placed in a rating band. [Full data and further information about inspection methodology is available in the data workbook for this inspection at Northamptonshire PDU.](#)

- There were concerning deficits in work to keep people safe at the point of assessment. The PDU received overnight arrest and domestic abuse call out information from the police. However, the use of domestic abuse information to inform assessments was sufficient in just 22 out of 70 cases we inspected. A failure by practitioners to request information was a significant factor, with no request made in 31 out of 70 cases including examples where there was a known history of violence against previous partners.
- There were significant backlogs in obtaining domestic abuse information from Northamptonshire Police and we inspected 10 cases where information was requested by practitioners but not received. Delays of up to two months in the return of this information were not uncommon. The PDU had recently dedicated a case administrator resource for two days per week to address the backlog and submitted a business case for access to police systems. This was yet to manifest in the cases we inspected.
- Inspectors identified 41 cases in which child safeguarding concerns linked to harm were evident. Disappointingly, sufficient information was available to inform assessment in only 15 out of 60 relevant cases. Inspectors noted some examples of requests being returned on the same day as the enquiry was made, which was positive. However, failure to request information from children's social care was the most prevalent issue (35 out of 60 relevant cases).
- Case administrator responsibility for these processes had recently been implemented to promote greater consistency. However, that is contingent on sufficient staffing at that grade where currently vacancies persist. In addition, improvements were required in practitioners using relevant information to inform their assessments. Practitioners used domestic abuse information sufficiently in just 14 out of 63 relevant cases. Safeguarding information was used sufficiently in only seven out of 59 relevant cases.
- Fewer than half of assessments analysed specific concerns and risks related to victims. There were several case examples where practitioners did not take a holistic view of offending behaviour, resulting in some victim groups omitted from risk assessments.

## P 2.2. Planning



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

Inadequate

Our rating<sup>5</sup> for planning is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions and is driven by the lowest score:

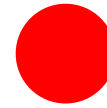
Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
<b>Does planning focus sufficiently on engaging the person on probation?</b>	39%
<b>Does planning focus sufficiently on reducing reoffending and supporting desistance?</b>	54%
<b>Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?</b>	<b>36%</b>

- Where we saw effective planning activity, people on probation understood their objectives and there were clear links to the work of partner agencies. Of respondents to our User Voice survey, 65 per cent stated that they were involved in creating their sentence plan with their probation practitioner. Engagement in planning for men was better than for women which was likely indicative of the inconsistencies identified in the service delivery for women on probation in Northamptonshire.
- Too few plans had sufficient focus on the protected characteristics or personal circumstances of people on probation. The lack of practitioner confidence to discuss these issues at assessment stage was a factor in failing to plan for potential barriers to engagement such as childcare, employment or lack of motivation.
- Despite strengths in assessing desistance factors, planning to reduce offending and support desistance required improvement in Northamptonshire. Fewer than two thirds of plans identified and prioritised critical offending-related factors, and almost half of plans (44 per cent) did not set out the services most likely to reduce offending.
- Planning to keep people safe was insufficient in almost two thirds (64 per cent) of cases we inspected. Due in part to inaccurate risk assessments and deficits in obtaining information from partner agencies involved in the management of risk, only 22 out of 60 relevant cases had plans which addressed and prioritised key risk of harm factors.

<sup>5</sup> 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. [Full data and further information about inspection methodology is available in the data workbook for this inspection at Northamptonshire PDU.](#)

- Contingency planning was an area of concern, with only 14 out of 59 relevant cases demonstrating effective plans to respond to escalating risk. We saw several contingency plans that did not adequately consider how to safeguard children and vulnerable adults in emerging domestic abuse scenarios.

## P 2.3. Implementation and delivery



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

Our rating<sup>6</sup> for implementation and delivery is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions and is driven by the lowest score:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
<b>Is the sentence or post-custody period implemented effectively with a focus on engaging the person on probation?</b>	43%
<b>Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support desistance?</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?</b>	27%

- Practitioners made efforts to enable people on probation to complete their sentences and demonstrated flexibility to take account of personal circumstances in 76 per cent of cases we inspected. Care should be taken however, to ensure that this flexibility remains proportionate as insufficient enforcement action was taken in 31 out of 48 relevant cases.
- The sequencing and timeliness of requirements was key to securing engagement and addressing risk and need. Sentence requirements did not start promptly or at an appropriate time in 27 out of 70 relevant cases. In eight of those cases this was due to non-compliance, but in a further 19 cases this was due to other factors including delays or errors by practitioners referring people to CRS. Forty-five cases in the inspected cohort had rehabilitation activity requirement (RAR) days ordered at court. However, at the point of inspection, 15 cases had yet to commence those RAR days. Recording issues and some reticence to use toolkits in supervision were contributing to this issue.
- Fifty-seven per cent of cases had been managed by more than one practitioner. This was largely due to increased numbers of new staff and sickness absence. Practitioners told inspectors that they lacked adequate capacity to read case notes or previous assessments when cases transferred from colleagues. Managers explained that whilst a case handover discussion would be expected, this was often not possible particularly when cases transferred due to unexpected absence.

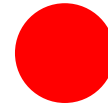
<sup>6</sup> The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, which is placed in a rating band, indicated in bold in the table. [Full data and further information about inspection methodology is available in the data workbook for this inspection at Northamptonshire PDU.](#)

- The delivery of services to support desistance was sufficient in just 21 per cent of cases, with deficits in the coordination of other organisations in over three quarters of relevant cases. Where inspectors identified specific factors linked to reoffending or risk, there was limited evidence that these had been addressed through adequate service delivery. This was reflective of some of the challenges linked to CRS provision, practitioner confidence in some of those pathways and availability of local services.
- Despite some strengths in the assessment of licence cases, fewer were judged to meet the threshold of sufficiency in relation to implementation and delivery than those on community sentences.
- Effective implementation of work to keep people safe was evident in too few cases in Northamptonshire. The PF requires resources be directed to high-risk cases. Levels of contact were insufficient to reduce reoffending and manage harm overall. However, this was particularly concerning in high-risk cases, where inspectors found six out of 14<sup>7</sup> cases did not have frequent enough contact. The coordination of other agencies to manage and minimise risk of harm was not done well enough in 13 out of 14 relevant cases assessed as high risk.
- There were concerning limitations in practitioner responsiveness to emerging risks such as the development of new relationships or further offending. Information sharing to safeguard children and victims of domestic abuse was insufficient in the PDU. Effective multi-agency liaison in respect of child safeguarding was evident in just four out of 41 relevant cases. In respect of domestic abuse, this figure was just eight out of 34 relevant cases. Inspectors identified 38 out of 59 relevant cases where risk indicated the need for a home visit, but this was not undertaken.

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<sup>7</sup> The findings relating to risk level have not been subject to a relative rate index analysis, which is a test used to compare rates of incidence, we report on our findings with that caveat.

## P 2.4. Reviewing



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

Our rating<sup>8</sup> for reviewing is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against three key questions and is driven by the lowest score:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
<b>Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting the compliance and engagement of the person on probation?</b>	49%
<b>Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting desistance?</b>	36%
<b>Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?</b>	<b>24%</b>

- Effective reviewing practice engaged the person on probation in developing strengths and understanding their progress or any existing barriers. Plans should be adjusted accordingly in light of new information linked to risk and need.
- Inspectors saw limited evidence of practitioners consistently engaging individuals in reviews in Northamptonshire, but this was done more often in low-risk cases.
- Inspectors saw too few examples of reviewing informed by liaison with other agencies. Such liaison was evident in less than one third of relevant cases, with practitioners often relying on self-reported updates from people on probation. Reviewing activity would be improved by enhanced professional curiosity used to verify individual accounts.
- Reviewing activity linked to risk of harm was insufficient overall. Just three out of 14 relevant high-risk cases we inspected had reviewed changes related to risk of harm and made necessary adjustments to the plan of work. Failures to make necessary adjustments included significant disclosures by people on probation to practitioners about inappropriate behaviour.
- Management oversight and OASys countersigning did not routinely identify deficits in casework or changes in risk that required review.

<sup>8</sup> 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.



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## **Outcomes**

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### **Strengths:**

- There was a small reduction in the number of people unemployed and unavailable for work between the commencement of supervision and our inspection.

### **Areas for improvement:**

- Sufficient improvements to those factors most closely linked to offending, both in developing strengths and addressing needs, were only evidenced in 14 out of 70 cases.
- Improvements to factors linked to risk of harm were only identified in six out of 62 relevant cases. In none of the high-risk cases we reviewed did we assess that there had been sufficient levels of progress to reduce risk, further evidencing the need for a renewed focus on good quality public protection activity in the PDU.
- Sufficient compliance was evident in only around half of cases inspected. Levels of compliance for women were worse than for men.

## Progress on previous recommendations

Previous recommendation	Action taken and impact	Categorisation	Improvement still required?
<i>From previous probation inspection (2022)</i>	<i>Summary of action taken and impact</i>	<i>Sufficient progress/Some progress/No progress</i>	<i>Yes/No If yes, consider repeating the recommendation</i>
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.	The PDU and region had delivered training events on these topics. However, it was acknowledged by the PDU that attendance rates at these events needed to improve, and this will be an ongoing focus in the next business year. Case inspection data indicated that insufficient use of risk information was ongoing.	Some progress	Yes
Ensure that SPOs have access to adequate induction and training to prepare them for and develop them in their roles.	A regional development offer for new SPOs has been implemented. However, this was not sequenced to commence in a timely way post promotion into the role. This meant that managers often had to rely on peers for support, and that workloads sometimes impacted on attendance.	Some progress	Yes

<p>Ensure priorities are clearly communicated to, and understood by, probation practitioners.</p>	<p>The amber plan on a page has been produced and shared through various means including via ComFEE and an all-staff call. A recent all-staff face-to-face event also focused on the theme of public protection. However, there remains a lack of clarity amongst practitioners about what they should prioritise. Our case inspection data indicates that work to keep people safe was not prioritised often enough.</p>	<p>Some progress</p>	<p>Yes</p>
<p>Ensure all administrative staff receive the training they need in order to complete the full range of duties following unification.</p>	<p>Case administrators undertake an induction programme underpinned by a handbook which outlines training required. Shadowing opportunities and buddy arrangements are facilitated where possible. This was more challenging in Wellingborough due to vacancies, but this will be further enhanced by efforts to bolster recruitment across administrative grades.</p>	<p>Sufficient progress</p>	<p>No</p>
<p>Implement the regional engaging people on probation strategy to</p>	<p>Northamptonshire PDU has made significant progress towards implementation of this strategy. There were a variety of methods</p>	<p>Sufficient progress</p>	<p>No</p>

<p>promote their involvement in service delivery.</p>	<p>used, both virtually and face to face, to collate feedback from those supervised in the PDU. Opportunities had been created for people on probation to represent themselves in key forums such as Indeterminate sentence for Public Protection and lifer panels. They are also invited to sit on recruitment panels for senior leaders and undertake mentoring roles both as mentors and mentees. The engagement lead manager has numerous plans to further enhance delivery of this work and was well supported by the region to do so.</p>		
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## Annexe one – Web links

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Full data from this inspection and further information about the methodology used to conduct this inspection is available [on our website](#).

A glossary of terms used in this report is available on our website using the following link: [Glossary \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/glossary)