



HM Inspectorate  
of Probation

An inspection of probation services in:  
The Probation Service – **East of England region**

HM Inspectorate of Probation, August 2024



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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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This was the first inspection of probation services in the East of England region under this inspection programme which started in October 2023. Across the region, inspectors were struck by the commitment and dedication of leaders and their staff. However, this did not amount to sufficient public protection work or support for people on probation to change. Disappointingly, the region was rated as 'Requires improvement' overall.

At a regional level, we found leaders had reasonable insight into the quality of delivery across its functions, supported by useful management information. That was not being translated though into clear direction and expectation setting for leaders of the region's Probation Delivery Units (PDUs). That was contributing to deficiencies in our inspection of casework overall.

The region was not effectively responding to and reducing the potential harm perpetrated by men against women and children. Some promising steps had been made in Essex to improve access to intelligence held by the police in relation to men who posed a risk of domestic abuse to women, however most of the region was still not integrated into whole systems with its partners. Cumbersome information-sharing arrangements meant court reports were being delayed or not delivered and assessments lacked crucial details. This is an area that requires urgent attention.

Too few people in the region were able to access sufficient support to resolve problems linked to their offending. Services that had been commissioned by the region were often not being delivered as intended or providing people on probation with meaningful help. Frustratingly, we found that practitioners were frequently identifying services which would be useful for people on probation, but the actual implementation of work was insufficient across offending pathways and across PDUs.

Most operational teams in the region were beset with chronic staffing issues, despite sustained work by the region to recruit where it was able to do so. Unpaid work teams were particularly badly affected, to the extent that in some locations there were very few supervisors available to facilitate placements for people on probation. Facilitators were also in short supply to deliver accredited programmes. Some sentence management teams and their senior probation officers (SPOs) had workloads and responsibilities which far exceeded what they could reasonably be expected to deliver.

There were some positive findings. Victim liaison officers (VLO) were providing an excellent service to victims of serious sexual and violent offences. Integrated Offender Management (IOM) was being led by a strong strategic leadership group who were developing an impressive evidence base for their work. People on probation were being integrated into the region's business and even recruited to work for it. Leaders were authentically committed to fostering a diverse and inclusive culture.

Many of the concerns in this report have been raised in previous inspections and our thematic reports. HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) should reflect carefully on what more it can do to support regions to deliver an acceptable level of service for people on probation and victims of crime.



**Martin Jones**  
HM Chief Inspector of Probation

# Ratings

## East of England

Fieldwork started June 2024

Score **5/24**

### Overall rating

Requires improvement



### 1. Organisational arrangements and activity

R 1.1 Leadership

Requires improvement



R 1.2 Staffing

Requires improvement



### 2. Service delivery

R 2.1 Public protection

Inadequate



R 2.2 Desistance

Inadequate



R 2.3 Court work

Inadequate



R 2.4 Unpaid work

Inadequate



R 2.5 Resettlement

Inadequate



R 2.6 Statutory victim work

Outstanding



# Executive summary

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## Introduction

East of England is one of the 12 regions of the Probation Service in England and Wales. Along with the Kent, Surrey and Sussex regions and several prisons, it forms part of the South-East and East area of HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS).

The region is responsible for overseeing work delivered in eight PDUs – Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Essex North, Essex South, Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk. Prior to this regional inspection, we inspected each PDU between February and June 2024.

At the time of our inspection announcement, 1,917 people were employed in East of England region. Most of those were in probation officer (PO) and probation services officer (PSO) grades. All PDUs were experiencing shortages of POs and administrative staff but the Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, and Essex PDUs were particularly badly affected. On average, POs were holding 39 cases each and PSOs were carrying 44 each. According to the workload management tool, which is used by the Probation Service to monitor available capacity, POs were holding on average 28 per cent more casework than they were allocated. PSOs were slightly over full capacity.

Regional leaders in East of England work within a complex criminal justice system. That includes seven police and crime commissioners (PCC) and their associated police forces. There are some 51 local authorities within the region, several local safeguarding partnerships and numerous prisons, courts, and approved premises.

## Methodology

We conducted fieldwork in each PDU across East of England between 12 February 2024 and 07 June 2024. We reviewed 438 cases, of which 289 were subject to a community sentence. From each of these cases we collated data for our public protection and desistance ratings. We conducted 318 interviews with probation practitioners and reviewed 302 court reports and 149 cases subject to resettlement provision. We inspected 79 unpaid work cases and 14 statutory victim cases from across the region where community sentences and licences had commenced between 25 June and 06 November 2023.

## 1 Organisational arrangements and activity

### R1.1 Leadership

Regional leadership was rated as 'Requires improvement'. Across all PDUs in the region, the quality of casework was poor, especially in relation to keeping people safe. Regional leaders had reasonable insight into that because of management information they had access to. However, systems for holding leaders to account and driving improvements to the delivery of work with people on probation were ineffective.

The Co-Commissioning Board and associated commissioning arrangements were not driving the delivery of high-quality services for people on probation in the region. Across all offending pathways, implementation of services at PDU level was insufficient. That included work in relation to accommodation, education, training, and employment (ETE), finance, benefit and debt, emotional wellbeing and substance misuse. The underlying cause of that was deficient commissioning

practice, some of which was related to national policy, and insufficient management of contracts and agreements once they had been awarded.

In most areas of the region, information-sharing arrangements with the police and local authorities in relation to domestic abuse and safeguarding children from harm were slow and inefficient. That was having an impact on the quality of risk assessments and management plans. Delays to intelligence sharing meant the region was often unable to provide pre-sentence reports and advice to courts. It was unclear who in the regional leadership team had lead responsibility for safeguarding children and providing strategic support to the PDUs and their partner agencies.

Leaders had overseen excellent work to integrate people on probation into the delivery of their work. Several people who had been on probation in the region had been recruited on a voluntary basis to support others during their sentences. Some people who had formerly been on probation had been recruited into permanent employment. Engagement with staff was generally being done well, supported by good digital platforms for communicating information to practitioners.

The region was supporting the development of evidence-based practice with people on probation. Most promisingly, the IOM team had worked with police colleagues to develop a system which was able to measure the scheme's impact on reoffending. A researcher had also been appointed on a temporary basis to evaluate some work being delivered by the region. Most reviews of Serious Further Offences (SFOs) were of a sufficient standard, which meant that the region was gaining good insight into where errors were being made on casework.

## **R1.2 Staffing**

Regional staffing was rated as 'Requires improvement'. Workforce planning was robust and recruitment activity led by the region had been non-stop. Leaders were building an inclusive culture, and teams generally represented the communities they served. However across almost all PDUs and operational functions in the region, critical frontline staffing arrangements were not sufficient to support people on probation to change and to protect others from harm. There were PO vacancies across all PDUs and issues with the provision of support to those completing the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) qualification, partly due to the volume of staff in those positions. There were major shortages of unpaid work supervisors and not enough programme facilitators in post.

A common theme was that SPOs were overwhelmed by wide spans of responsibility which affected their ability to oversee the quality of work within their teams. Practitioners were generally receiving supervision from their managers but that was not having an impact on the quality of their practice with people on probation.

Widespread vacancies across unpaid work supervisor roles meant there were too few staff to deliver enough placements to meet demand. Accredited programmes faced similar problems which had been made worse by a prolonged nationally led grade review of sex offender programme facilitators. Consequently, the capacity to deliver some programmes was severely restricted. Structured interventions, which are group work sessions for people on probation, had been deprioritised and were being delivered in very small numbers.

The regional approach to learning and continuous professional development was poor. Aside from trainees completing the PQiP, learning and development almost exclusively amounted to attending online training briefings. Those sessions did not lead to improvements in the quality of casework being delivered by practitioners. Not enough was being done to check that learning was being applied in practice.

## **2 Service delivery**

### **2.1 Public protection**

Across all PDUs in the region, public protection work was insufficient.

Many assessments were being completed without reference to crucial information about safeguarding and domestic abuse. Information sharing arrangements with the police and children's services in most parts of the region were unnecessarily complex and inefficient. When information was made available, practitioners were not always making use of it, and quality assurance systems were not leading to insufficient assessments being rectified.

Checks to make sure people could be safely curfewed to their home address, without posing a risk to women and children living there, were not always being done. Some people who were sentenced to a curfew requirement were completing their orders without ever having had the equipment fitted, despite the region raising concerns with the contractor.

In most PDUs, multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) reviews at level 1 were not consistently taking place. In practical terms, that meant SPOs were not reviewing the progress of many people sentenced in relation to serious offences.

### **2.2 Desistance**

Practitioners were generally identifying what had led people to offend and what might help them to change. Sentence planning in most cases was personalised to people on probation and identified relevant sources of support.

However, the delivery of services to support people to change was widely insufficient. In the casework we inspected across PDUs, too few people on probation were engaged in high-quality supportive services. The Co-Commissioning Board was not effectively holding providers to account or ensuring that referrals to services were being made in accordance with the level of need amongst people on probation.

### **2.3 Court work**

Pre-sentence reports were not drawing on domestic abuse and safeguarding information in all relevant cases. That was partly due to delays in obtaining information from partner agencies. Where information had been obtained, there were too many instances of it not being integrated into risk of harm assessments.

Information sharing delays meant teams were frequently unable to provide reports to court on the same day as the request. The region was missing opportunities to influence sentencing decisions and manage demand, particularly in relation to unpaid work hours. That was undermining hard work by senior leaders to engage and work with sentencers, and HM Courts and Tribunals Service at a strategic level.

## **2.4 Unpaid work**

Supervisor shortages and poor enforcement practice in sentence management teams meant not enough unpaid work hours were being completed. Many people on probation were failing to complete their orders as required within 12 months and the volume of hours being delivered was not sufficient to clear a backlog of hours which had developed over time during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Unpaid work assessments were often insufficient, particularly in relation to how risk of harm would be managed during placements. Communication between practitioners and sentence management teams and unpaid supervisors was problematic. In some cases, people on probation were starting unpaid work without having been assessed first.

Despite those issues, unpaid work placements were constructive for people on probation and focused on making improvements to local communities in the region. Beneficiaries of unpaid work were almost always entirely satisfied with the work led by unpaid work supervisors and groups of people on probation. The region was successfully promoting the use of online learning during unpaid work, which was accounting for a reasonable number of completed unpaid work hours.

## **2.5 Resettlement**

Resettlement to support people leaving prison was being hindered by staff shortages and ineffective delivery models. Pre-release teams had too few staff to deliver meaningful support to people serving short sentences and as such the impact of their work was very limited. The Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) model for people serving longer prison sentences was not leading to robust pre-release planning in many cases, despite administrative processes being followed.

Regional leaders had established good links with their counterparts in local prisons and other agencies involved in resettlement and there were aspirations to develop that further. In practice however, there was a lack of operational and strategic alignment between the delivery of services in prison and the community.

## **2.6 Statutory victim work**

Victims of serious sexual and violent offences who had opted into the Victim Contact Scheme were receiving excellent support from the regional victim liaison team. The team was almost fully staffed with experienced professionals. Middle managers were supportive and had expert knowledge of their field.

Our inspection of casework found VLOs were always giving victims the opportunity to express their views in relation to planning for the release of perpetrators from prison. Communication with sentence management teams was consistent and clear. That was leading to protections being put in place to support the safety of victims who had opted into the scheme.



## 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.

### **East of England region should:**

1. implement a system for directing and following up action in response to themes from SFO reviews and other sources of information about the quality of practice
2. make arrangements with police forces and local authorities across all of the region to enable swift and unhindered access to intelligence about domestic abuse and the safeguarding of children
3. appoint a designated regional safeguarding lead with sufficient authority to support heads of PDU and be accountable for engagement with local safeguarding partnerships
4. review systems for commissioning and assurance of service providers to ensure that people on probation have access to high-quality services relevant to their needs
5. conduct an analysis of skills, knowledge and experience across the region and implement arrangements for checking that learning has been consolidated in practice
6. ensure the health, safety, and welfare of unpaid work supervisors so far as is reasonably practicable, including in relation to the provision of suitable welfare facilities, the control of exposure to vibration at work, explosive atmospheres and other relevant hazards.

### **HMPPS should:**

7. delegate greater authority to regional probation directors in relation to spending, including on commissioned services and contract management, and streamline commercial processes
8. develop greater alignment between the strategic objectives of local prisons, regions and their partners with a focus on delivering high-quality resettlement services
9. introduce market supplements or other benefits for business-critical roles and in locations which have been persistently difficult to recruit into
10. evaluate the effectiveness of training material delivered to practitioners in relation to keeping people safe and provide reporting mechanisms for regions to identify concerns about deficits in practitioner skills and knowledge.

## Background

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East of England is one of the 12 regions of the Probation Service in England and Wales. Along with Kent, Surrey and Sussex regions and several prisons, it forms part of the South-East and East area of HMPPS.

The region employs 1,917 people, of which 1,098 were probation practitioners. It oversees eight PDUs – Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Essex South, Essex North, Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk. The region manages an overall caseload of 15,891 people in the community, of which 10,844 are serving community sentences and the remainder are on licence from prison. Some 7,190,918 people live in the East of England.

The region works across the boundaries of seven PCCs and 51 local authorities. It works with eight local approved premises, the Military Corrective Training Centre and 16 prisons in its area, although none of those are managed by the region. The region provides a service to 19 magistrates' courts and 11 Crown Courts. It works in partnership with 11 youth justice team boards.

Commissioned rehabilitative services (CRS) are available for people on probation across the region. The providers are Interventions Alliance for accommodation, St Giles Wise and Advance for women's services, and Nacro and the Forward Trust for personal wellbeing. A grant-funded arrangement is in place with several organisations to deliver finance, benefit and debt advice to people on probation. Dependency and recovery workers are funded in partnership with local authorities.

At the time of the inspection announcement, four PDUs in the region were categorised as being 'green' on the prioritisation framework (PF). Two were categorised as 'amber' and two were 'red'. That reflected the relative staffing deficits each PDU was facing. All PDUs had fewer staff in post than they were budgeted to employ, but those in 'red' and 'amber' status had more significant staffing deficits than the others. The PF is national guidance produced by the Probation Service to provide PDUs with clarity about what to pause when there is insufficient capacity to deliver services.

# 1. Organisational arrangements and activity

## R 1.1. Leadership



Regional leadership drives the delivery of a high-quality, personalised and responsive service for all people on probation.

Requires improvement

### Strengths:

- Leaders valued the views and experiences of people on probation. A culture of recruiting volunteer peer mentors to support people on probation was continuing to deepen and mature. That included people on probation meeting with senior leaders, being involved in the delivery of accredited programmes, unpaid work pre-placement workshops and meeting people upon their release from prison. Several people who had formerly been supervised by the Probation Service were now employed by the region.
- Information sharing with police forces in relation to domestic abuse intelligence had improved in some parts of the region. In Essex, administrative staff had been recruited and trained to check police systems for intelligence which could help probation practitioners to make more accurate assessments about risk. Leaders were committed to expanding the approach across the region, based on evidence that showed it was enabling better access to information.
- Most SFO reviews in the region were rated as either 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. In general, reviews were sufficiently analytical and identified learning appropriately. That was supported by robust quality assurance and supportive leadership within the reviewing team. Staff who reviewed SFOs had undertaken human factors training to understand more about how to reduce errors, influence practitioner behaviour and analyse wider systemic issues.
- IOM was governed by a strong strategic oversight group. The region was working very closely and effectively with police and third sector partners in the region. Expectations about delivery had led to consistency in delivery across PDUs. An excellent reporting system had been developed jointly with the police, which demonstrated that the IOM scheme was leading to impressive reductions in both the severity and frequency of reoffending. The system had the potential to act as a deepening source of evidence on reoffending over time.
- Senior leaders were committed to engaging with staff across the region. Communication within the region was supported by an outstanding intranet platform which provided staff with comprehensive and up-to-date information about their work. Senior leaders held regular sessions with all staff for questions and answers. Most staff who responded to our survey felt that the region promoted openness and constructive challenge.

- The senior leadership team had commissioned research to evaluate the effectiveness of work in some areas of the region. A specialist research lead had recently been appointed and their findings had been presented to senior leaders. This has the potential to support evidence-based practice in future.

### **Areas for improvement:**

- Senior leaders had taken insufficient action to improve the quality of risk assessments, management plans and delivery of work in the community. That was despite consistent and clear findings from SFOs and the region's own audit findings. Not enough direction had been given to heads of PDUs about minimum expectations or priorities in relation to the quality of risk assessment and management. Too little was being done to check that improvements to the quality of work to keep people safe were being implemented in practice.
- Governance arrangements in relation to organisational risks were poor and ineffective. The region had no audit and risk assurance committee or equivalent body in place. Senior leaders had reasonable insight into significant risks the region was facing but had not been doing enough to direct and control assurance activity to provide confidence that critical issues relating to delivery were improving. The unintended impact was that the region had been tolerating unacceptable levels of insufficient delivery, which was leaving people at risk of harm.
- The Co-Commissioning Board had not been ensuring that services for people on probation were being delivered as intended. Many of the commissioned dependency and recovery workers were not yet in post. Grants awarded to small organisations providing finance, benefit and debt advice were not clearly delivering good quality work with people on probation. Work coaches provided by the Department for Work and Pensions were at risk of being withdrawn due to low usage. Women's services were fragmented and were not delivering reasonable quality often enough. Housing 'navigators' were not having a positive impact on homelessness. The Accommodation for Ex-Offenders scheme funding had not been used consistently, partly because of difficulties with recruitment in local authorities.
- Unfounded concerns about data protection and other blockages were getting in the way of efficient partnerships working between probation services, police, and children's services in some areas of the region. Regional senior leaders had not intervened effectively enough to resolve those difficulties. The consequence of information sharing being delayed meant that pre-sentence reports were often not being prepared on people who were being sentenced and assessments were being completed without full information about the risk posed by people on probation.
- Regional strategic oversight of work to safeguard children from harm lacked clarity and accountability. While there were local arrangements in place for heads of PDUs, senior regional leaders were not sufficiently and actively overseeing the quality of safeguarding practice within the PDUs. The region did not have a designated safeguarding lead with the appropriate authority to act as a point of contact for PDU heads and to support strategic liaison with partner agencies where necessary.

- The health and safety of unpaid work staff in some locations was not being ensured so far as was reasonably practicable. Some supervisors were required to use shipping containers in wholly unsuitable locations, sometimes with no welfare facilities. Where welfare facilities were being provided, some were in a disgraceful condition. Fuel was being stored in circumstances without adequate consideration given to controlling the risk of flammable vapours igniting. Responsibility for managing health and safety matters on unpaid work was convoluted and not supportive of safe working.
- Strategic leadership of resettlement was disjointed. The head of resettlement was a temporary post which was only funded until March 2025. Commissioning of services was not joined up with partner agencies involved in resettlement and not based on good evidence. Pre-release teams were having very little impact on the quality of work to prepare people for the community. Our inspection of resettlement work across the region found there were widespread issues with the level of contact with people in prison before release and the quality of assessments and planning.

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## R 1.2. Staffing



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

Requires improvement

### Strengths:

- Workforce planning was comprehensive. Regional senior leaders with the support of specialist advice from the Ministry of Justice had insight into current and future recruitment needs. Recruitment had been practically continuous across practitioner and administrative grades. Particular focus was given to the recruitment of PSOs to counteract relatively high attrition rates within that grade, and to increase the number of people who could potentially train as POs in future.
- A regional induction scheme had been developed in response to high numbers of new starters. Effective systems were in place to do exit interviews with most leavers, which enabled the workforce planning committee to develop insight into what was causing staff to leave the organisation.
- Regional senior leaders had a genuine interest in the profile of the workforce and of addressing inequities where they existed. Consideration had been given, for instance, to improving promotion prospects for staff with disabilities. Firm action had been taken in relation to unacceptable behaviours in the workplace, including climate assessments and commitments from the Regional Probation Director. Mandatory workshops had been commissioned to support the embedding of an inclusive culture across the region.
- The team of MAPPA co-ordinators was fully staffed with established practitioners and was well led by the Head of Public Protection. That enabled consistent decision-making about whether to manage complex cases at levels two or three. Audits and self-assessments were being used to provide confidence to the team and its partners that MAPPA conferences were being delivered effectively.
- VLOs were led by highly capable managers who were experts in their field. The team had manageable workloads and received regular feedback and support. That enabled them to deliver good quality work to victims of serious crime.

### Areas for improvement:

- Regional leaders had too little insight into the competence of their leaders and staff. It did not have a means of capturing and analysing skills, knowledge and experience of both managers and practitioners. The region had access to data about who had attended training and briefing events, but expectations about checking that knowledge was being applied in practice were undefined. That meant the region lacked evidence about what to prioritise in relation to staff development.
- Not enough unpaid work supervisors were available to deliver sufficient placements for people on probation. Some 40 per cent of unpaid work posts

overall were vacant, with supervisor posts being particularly badly affected. The region was struggling to recruit people into these roles, partly because the terms of employment were not considered to be attractive enough. There was insufficient capacity to deliver enough weekend placements for people on probation who were in work. Many supervisors were regularly working overtime but that was not sustainable or enough to meet demand.

- Too few facilitators were in post to run enough groups for people sentenced to accredited programmes. A national grade review of facilitators trained to deliver programmes for men who have committed sexual offences had led to only around half of those staff being in post. That was severely restricting the capacity of the team to deliver programmes. As a result, the iHorizon programme for men who had committed sexual offences online had been suspended in parts of the region, and there were issues with the capacity to deliver other programmes.
- Low numbers of programmes facilitators meant that there was very little capacity to deliver structured interventions. That meant people on probation who would have benefited from group work to change their thinking and behaviour were not being offered access to relevant courses.
- The operating model for supporting the resettlement of people from prison back into the community was not being delivered as intended, partly because there were insufficient staff available to support it. Pre-release teams of practitioners were intended to support people serving short prison sentences, but the size of the teams was such that they were unable to do so. Practitioners managing people serving longer prison sentences under the OMiC model were sometimes unable to keep up with the demand for assessments, which meant people in prison were not in some cases able to access interventions relevant to their needs.
- Staffing arrangements at PDU level were generally not supporting quality work with people on probation. Several common themes were found across the PDUs, including SPOs being overwhelmed by wide spans of control and spans of responsibility, practitioner vacancies across all sites, especially at PO grade, difficulties accommodating the local training needs of PQiPs who had been recruited in high volumes, the absence of a comprehensive training and development offer for PSOs and practitioner supervision not having an impact on practice.
- Management oversight of casework was insufficient, ineffective, or absent in most of the examples we inspected in PDUs and in the unpaid work team. Many managers had attended training on nationally developed Reflective Practice Supervision Standards. However, there was no evidence that the model was leading to better risk management and support for people on probation.
- Mental health-related absence was the leading cause of staff being off work across the region. Many of the people who had recently left the organisation said they were experiencing unreasonably high workloads. That was unsurprising given that most teams in the region lacked enough staff. More needed to be done by regional senior leaders in relation to ensuring the causes of work-related stress were being addressed.

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## Feedback from people on probation

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User Voice, working with HM Inspectorate of Probation, had contact with 586 people on probation across the region.

### Strengths:

- Most people who were surveyed (76 per cent) said that practitioners took time to understand their personal needs. That reflected our findings at PDU level, where we found that the views of most people on probation were considered when assessments were being made.
- Probation offices were within reasonable travel distances for most people, according to those who responded to the survey. Most probation buildings were close to public transport links and located in easily accessible places. Where people lived in rural areas, the region had made arrangements to support compliance. That included picking up people from agreed locations for unpaid work placements.
- Almost all people who responded to the survey said they felt safe accessing probation buildings. Most respondents felt they were treated fairly by their practitioners. One person said:

*“I look forward to my appointments with my probation officer. She is friendly, kind and extremely caring and helpful.”*

### Areas for improvement:

- People from a white background who responded to the survey were more likely to report a positive relationship with their practitioner than those who were from a Black African, British, or Caribbean background. The region had limited insight into the views and experiences of people on probation from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and what bearing that had on their engagement.



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## Diversity and inclusion

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### Strengths:

- Senior leaders were representative of the population in the East of England by ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and gender. That reflected their genuine commitment to inclusiveness across the region. All but one of the PDUs were representative of the communities they serviced in relation to ethnicity.
- The Regional Probation Director had published pledges on tackling discrimination and improving diversity. They distilled the region's intent to sustain a supportive culture for staff from all backgrounds.
- The regional equalities board was well established and focused on integrating equity, diversity, and inclusion into the everyday business of the region. It provided space for senior leaders and staff representatives to work together on matters relating to staff diversity.
- Where concerns had been raised at PDU level about inappropriate behaviours, senior leaders had responded sensitively and appropriately. Mandatory sessions for all staff had been commissioned to promote expected standards of behaviour in the workplace.

### Areas for improvement:

- The region had appropriate systems for recording the characteristics of people on probation but was not using data enough to inform decisions about the commissioning of services. The commissioning strategy was not sufficiently responsive to the profile of people on probation in the region. That meant there were limited services for neurodiverse people and young adults in particular.
- The provision for women on probation overall was insufficient. Most women were reporting to offices where men were present. The provision of space for women to meet with support workers through CRS was inconsistent. Our inspection of casework found that women were generally not receiving high-quality support in relation to issues related to their offending.
- The region had limited insight into the experiences of people with protected characteristics who had received services. That meant there may have been disproportionalities in relation to access and outcomes from services which were unknown to senior leaders.

## 2. Service delivery

### R 2.1. Public protection



High-quality, personalised and responsive services are delivered to protect the public.

Inadequate

Our rating<sup>1</sup> for public protection is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against four key questions and is driven by the lowest score:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
Does assessment focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	28%
Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	45%
Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?	28%
Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?	38%

- Work to keep people safe was consistently the least sufficient area of practice across all the PDUs we inspected and at all stages of sentence management from assessment onwards. A considerable proportion of that was related to practitioners not having access to intelligence about domestic abuse. Under half of assessments were completed without reference to information held by the police. That was partly because systems in some parts of the region were not enabling practitioners to access the information they needed swiftly enough.
- Where information about domestic abuse was available, practitioners were not always making sufficient use of it in their assessments. Under two-thirds of relevant assessments across the region did not draw on sufficient sources of information. One of the causes of that was high workloads which were affecting the time practitioners and their managers could dedicate to assessments. This was also related to the competence of some practitioners and ineffective quality assurance systems for identifying and remediating insufficient assessments.

<sup>1</sup> The rating for the standard is driven by the aggregate scores from PDUs for the key questions, which is placed in a rating band. [Full data and further information about inspection methodology is available in the data workbook for this inspection on our website.](#)

- The implementation of sentences was generally not sufficient to keep people safe. In some 61 per cent of cases regionally, insufficient attention had been paid to protecting victims from harm. Home visits were not being carried out often enough and the involvement of other agencies to support the management of risk was sufficient in only 110 out of 369 relevant cases. A complex case pilot was in place to support practitioners on a small number of challenging cases in some PDUs, but systems that should have been in place to give managers oversight over routine casework, including MAPPA level 1 reviews, were not taking place in practice.
- Worryingly, domestic abuse and safeguarding information was not obtained and used in 27 out of 52 curfew assessments, including in cases where Home Detention Curfew upon release from prison was being considered. That meant the risk was not fully understood in many cases where a person was required to abide by a curfew but lived with other people. Aside from that, many people were completing their curfew requirements without ever having had a tag fitted, despite the region raising all instances with the contractor. That meant leaders had no way of knowing whether those people actually complied with orders to stay at home during specified hours.

## R 2.2. Desistance



High-quality, personalised and responsive services are delivered to promote desistance. **Inadequate**

Our rating<sup>2</sup> for desistance is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against four key questions and is driven by the lowest score:

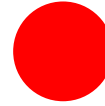
Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
<b>Does assessment focus sufficiently on the factors linked to offending and desistance?</b>	66%
<b>Does planning focus sufficiently on reducing reoffending and supporting desistance?</b>	66%
<b>Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support desistance?</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting desistance?</b>	49%

- Assessments generally identified what was linked to people offending. Planning in most cases identified the strengths of people on probation and characteristics that might reduce the likelihood of further offending. Practitioners in most PDUs were identifying services during planning that were relevant to the needs of people on probation.
- Far too many people on probation were not receiving sufficient support in relation to problems that were related to their offending. The delivery of support in relation to ETE; finance, benefit and debt; and drug and alcohol misuse was especially poor. The volume of people sentenced to drug rehabilitation requirements and alcohol treatment requirements had increased but there was no evidence they were receiving greater support than those on other community orders. Waiting lists for primary mental health treatment requirements were very long, although the region had obtained additional funding to provide more capacity.

<sup>2</sup> The rating for the standard is driven by the aggregate scores from PDUs for 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 on our website.](#)

- Regional leaders were not holding providers to account effectively enough or ensuring that referral volumes to some services were commensurate with the level of need in PDUs. There had been delays to some services starting due to a national freeze on spending. Contract terms for CRS, which had been set outside of the region, were unhelpful, and there were unnecessarily bureaucratic restrictions imposed on the region in relation to spending through direct awards to providers. But more needed to be done in relation to ensuring that matters which were within the control and influence of the region were being acted upon.
- Except for people convicted of sexual offences, most people who were sentenced to accredited programmes failed to complete them successfully. Weak enforcement practice in relation to non-compliance and delays to people appearing in court for breach hearings were factors which were holding back completion rates. Leaders had established links with practitioners writing pre-sentence reports at court, but facilitators were segregated from sentence management teams, which was having an impact on communication.

## R 2.3. Court work



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

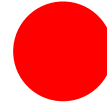
Our rating<sup>3</sup> for court work is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against one key question:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
<b>Is the pre-sentence information and advice provided to court sufficiently analytical and personalised to the individual, supporting the court's decision-making?</b>	<b>31%</b>

- Most pre-sentence reports were sufficient to inform courts on sentencing judgements. In 79 per cent of cases, the defendant was meaningfully involved in the report. The person's readiness to change was routinely being considered. The personal characteristics of people about to be sentenced were considered across many of the reports we inspected. The causes of offending and likelihood of reoffending were commonly identified in the reports we inspected.
- Information about safeguarding children and domestic abuse was not being obtained frequently enough. Domestic abuse intelligence was only obtained in 155 out of 281 relevant reports. Where it had been made available, authors were not always applying the information to their assessments. That meant risk assessments in reports were often incomplete and proposals were not always considering the safety of others.
- Court reports were taking too long to complete. A minority of reports were being completed on the same day they were requested by courts. The principal cause was that practitioners were waiting for several days and, in some cases, weeks for information about safeguarding children and domestic abuse to arrive. As a result, too many people were being sentenced without being informed by a pre-sentence report.
- The region was missing opportunities to support and influence sentencing decisions. The number of unpaid work hours being sentenced consistently outstripped the capacity of the region to deliver sufficient placements. Many of those sentences were being passed without a pre-sentence report having been written. Regional leaders had been engaging with sentencers and with local SPOs in courts but more needed to be done in relation to providing pre-sentence advice consistently and swiftly.

<sup>3</sup> The rating for the standard is driven by the aggregate score from PDU and unpaid work case inspections, 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 on our website.](#)

## R 2.4. Unpaid work



Unpaid work is delivered safely and effectively, engaging the person on probation in line with the expectations of the court. **Inadequate**

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

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
<b>Is the assessment and planning of unpaid work personalised?</b>	<b>39%</b>
<b>Do arrangements for unpaid work maximise rehabilitative elements and support desistance?</b>	75%
<b>Is unpaid work delivered safely?</b>	49%
<b>Is the sentence of the court implemented appropriately?</b>	70%

- People on probation were generally instructed to attend placements of sufficient quality. Feedback from the beneficiaries of unpaid work was overwhelmingly positive. There were numerous constructive placements which were useful to local communities. One of many excellent examples of that was a fly-tipping response initiative in Northamptonshire. Several tonnes of refuse had been removed by people on probation, with an average response time of less than 24 hours of incidents being reported.
- The region was effectively promoting education and training as a means of completing unpaid work hours. People on probation were consistently engaging in online training in high numbers. That had benefits for people in relation to their employment prospects and was contributing to the overall completion of unpaid work.
- Assessments were not always considering how risk of harm to others would be managed during unpaid work. That included instances where information about risks related to sexual offending had not been shared with unpaid work supervisors. In some cases, unpaid work assessments had not been completed before people on probation started their placements.
- Enforcement of non-compliance with unpaid work was often lacking or indefensible. Less than half of unpaid work placements were being attended. Far too many instances of non-attendance were being accepted by practitioners without appropriate enforcement action being taken. Unpaid work supervisors were not always receiving feedback when they reported unacceptable behaviour back to the practitioner responsible for the sentence.

<sup>4</sup> The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, from unpaid work cases inspected during regional fieldwork, 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 on our website.](#)

## R 2.5. Resettlement



Resettlement work is timely, personalised, and coordinated, addressing the individual's resettlement needs and supporting their integration into the community. Inadequate

Our rating<sup>5</sup> for resettlement is based on the percentage of cases we inspected being judged satisfactory against one key question:

Key question	Percentage 'Yes'
<b>Is resettlement timely, personalised, and coordinated, and does it address key resettlement needs and support the individual's integration into the community?</b>	<b>35%</b>

- Work to prepare people for release from prison and to plan the management of their risk to others was often insufficient. More than half of the cases inspected lacked an effective handover between prison and community practitioners before release. Too few people in prison received contact from the community probation practitioner before release, which meant opportunities to understand their needs and start planning were being missed.
- People serving short prison sentences in prisons within the region were not getting sufficient support prior to their release. Pre-release teams were present in some prisons and virtually supporting others, but in practice we found very little evidence that their work was having any effective impact. That was partly because the scope of their role and purpose was not fully clear. It was also related to the team being very small, being based on national operating model restrictions, lacking capacity to work with the volume of people serving short sentences.
- The OMiC model for prisoners serving longer sentences was not supportive of robust pre-release preparation. In just over two-thirds of relevant cases we inspected, a handover between the prison offender manager and community offender manager took place, but that was not associated with sufficient quality planning in relation to risk of harm or coordination with other agencies in prisons. Practitioners in prisons and especially in the community had too little capacity to dedicate enough time to people in prison prior to their release.

<sup>5</sup> The rating for the standard is driven by the aggregate data from resettlement cases in PDU inspections, giving a score for the key question, 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 on our website.](#)



- Strategic oversight of resettlement work was disjointed and fractured, despite most prisons except four privately run establishments being directly under the control of HMPPS. Since the appointment of a new Area Executive Director, a prison and probation senior leadership group had been established, which was welcome. There was a pressing need to improve operational integration between prison and probation staff and to ensure that the commissioning of services for people leaving prison was based on their needs and the achievement of reasonable outcomes.

## R 2.6. Statutory victim work



Relevant and timely information is provided to victims of a serious offence, and they are given the opportunity to contribute their views at key points in the sentence. **Outstanding**

Our rating<sup>6</sup> for victim work 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 initial contact with victims encourage engagement with the Victim Contact Scheme and provide information about sources of support?</b>	93%
<b>Is there effective information and communication exchange to support the safety of victims?</b>	<b>90%</b>
<b>Does pre-release contact with victims allow them to make appropriate contributions to the conditions of release?</b>	100%

In this section, 'statutory victim work' means activity delivered by the region in relation to the Victim Contact Scheme. That provides victims with the right to support from the Probation Service where the perpetrator of a violent or sexual offence is sentenced to 12 months in prison or more.

- Initial contact with victims was made in almost all the cases we inspected. In all cases, clear information was given to victims about what they were entitled to expect from the scheme. In some locations, VLOs were co-located with police witness care units. Where issues about being notified following sentences arose, middle managers had taken effective action to improve communication.
- Communication between VLOs and probation practitioners in sentence management teams was effective. In all cases we inspected, relevant information about victims had been shared with practitioners to inform their risk management planning. VLOs had delivered briefings to practitioners and taken trainee probation officers out on visits to victims to successfully raise the profile of their team.
- In every case inspected, victims were given an opportunity to express their views before perpetrators were released from prison. Their views were always treated with sensitivity and respect. That ensured that information needed to inform the imposition of licence conditions and contingency plans was available. VLOs had manageable caseloads and were well supported by

<sup>6</sup> The rating for the standard is driven by the lowest score on each of the key questions, from eligible cases inspected as part of regional fieldwork, 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 on our website.](#)

middle managers, which enabled them to provide consistently effective services to victims.

- Victims were not always given advice about what to do if the perpetrator made unwanted contact with them. Support could have been strengthened by providing victims with details of local sources of help more often. Those would have deepened the support available to victims beyond the help provided by VLOs.

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## Learning from Serious Further Offences

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SFOs in the region were dealt with by a team of eight reviewing managers who were led by an Investigations Manager. Between December 2022 and December 2023, the team completed 23 SFO reviews:

- Most recent SFO reviews were rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. None were rated as 'Inadequate'. The team was almost fully staffed. Quality control arrangements were robust and generally effective. The team was well supported by their line manager. Newer members of the team were being supported by more experienced colleagues through a buddying approach.
- All reviewing managers had attended training on human factors. That had developed the team's insight into how organisational factors were related to individual decision-making and errors. The team had started to use human factors to understand the underlying and root causes of SFOs.
- Learning from SFOs was being captured on an excellent reporting system developed under the leadership of the Head of Performance and Quality. That gave senior leaders and other staff insight into common factors arising out of SFOs and emerging trends. Disappointingly, the reporting system had not yet been used by senior leaders as a means of framing development activity for practitioners across the region.
- Regional leaders were not ensuring that findings from SFOs were leading to improvements in the quality of risk management work with people on probation. Many of the issues identified in SFO reviews were recurrent themes and reflected our inspection of casework. That included poor-quality risk assessments and management plans, ineffective work to safeguard children and a lack of interventions being delivered. Improvements were needed to the way in which learning was circulated and embedded into practice across PDUs.

## Progress on previous recommendations

Previous recommendation	Action taken and impact	Categorisation	Improvement still required?
The region should support senior and middle managers to manage and prioritise both their individual and team workloads across the PDU (Essex North PDU).	The region had provided some external support to the PDU, supported by the organisational development team in HMPPS. That included 'sprints' to look at how to prioritise key aspects of quality practice and the implementation of those operationally.	Some progress	Yes
The region should prioritise quality assurance of case inspection (Essex North PDU).	The regional case assessment tool was now in use. Quality development officers had delivered briefings in relation to quality. Risk assessments were generally insufficient, and very little rehabilitative work was taking place during the implementation of people's sentences. There was no improvement between the quality of casework between the two inspections.	Some progress	No
The region should ensure that management information in relation to CRS is made available at PDU level so that waiting times and backlogs are understood (Northamptonshire PDU).	CRS management information is now made available via dashboards which are shared with PDU heads and available to line managers.	Sufficient progress	No

## 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)