

On 11 October 2024, Chief Inspector of Probation, Martin Jones spoke to members at the National Association of Probation Officers AGM:

“This is my first opportunity to speak at the NAPO conference as Chief Inspector of Probation, so I would firstly like to pay tribute to the work you do.

The probation officer’s work can be thankless, and it often doesn’t get the attention and applause it deserves.

So, I’d like to start by saying a huge thank you for the work you do. It is work of critical importance.

The work of probation is crucial to reducing reoffending, turning people’s lives around and keeping communities safer.

Probation is one of the few areas of public service where you can genuinely say you have the ability to change lives for the better. Every day the work you do makes a difference.

Three decades working in criminal justice has demonstrated to me that an effective probation service can reduce reoffending, keep the public safer, and reduce future victims.

The scale of your work is astonishing.

- The probation service manages nearly a quarter of a million cases (three times the number of people in prison).
- Every week around a thousand people are released from custody into your supervision.
- The probation service supervises c 165,000 people in the community including over 100,000 on community orders or suspended sentence orders.
- You are managing over 60,000 prisoners on licence, and planning and preparing for the release of more than that.
- The SDS 40 changes have placed even greater pressure on probation.

I know you are under unprecedented pressure, which means you are not able to make the impact we would all want.

Alongside the caseload pressures you have also faced massive change.

As is clear from our recent inspection reports, the current performance of the Probation Service is unfortunately hamstrung and falling short of its full potential because of a mismatch between the large caseloads, lack of resources and the significant learning and development needs of a newly recruited frontline service.

It is not just about probation. Achieving good results depends on:

- Good information sharing
- Stable accommodation
- Having the right support services in the community in particular for drugs, alcohol and mental health.

My assessment is that our probation service has too few staff, with too little experience, managing too many cases.

Our PDU findings show a strong link between staffing and performance and, while it is positive that 1,000 new trainee probation officers are being recruited, this will not fix all issues in the short-term - it is crucial that the challenges we are seeing in our inspections are addressed.

I applaud the recent recruitment activity that has been underway, but there is still more to be done, particularly around retention and ensuring the right people are in these roles, with the right support and training.

We are recruiting people but are they staying? How do you ensure experience is retained, especially with a growing pool of newly qualified probation officers? Our current thematic inspection on recruitment, retention and training will explore these issues further.

Inspection findings:

I have been Chief Inspector of Probation since March of this year, and my reports since then have made for difficult reading.

In every recent inspection of probation services carried out by my Inspectorate, we have delivered ratings of either 'Inadequate' or 'Requires Improvement'. That is not a comment on individuals – it is a comment on the challenges you face and the need for action.

It is vital that we do not shy away from delivering those important messages.

My Inspectorate continues to identify where improvements need to be made, and we are seeing change is especially needed around the quality of risk of harm and public protection work. Specifically, this includes improvements in information sharing arrangements for domestic abuse and child safeguarding, along with ensuring that information is used effectively.

While staff are undoubtedly willing, do people have enough time, training and experience? Do we need better tools and national protocols to make this easier?

I am also acutely aware of the need to maintain morale. As Chief Inspector, one of my priorities is to shine a light on effective practice and, despite our findings, we are seeing examples of good practice, and some particularly excellent work in certain areas. Where I find good practice, I will applaud it.

We have seen some impressive work around women's services, where women on probation have been able to access a wide range of support, activities and specialist services. We have also seen a high standard of victim work across the regions inspected so far.

I believe it is essential to highlight this work and to ensure that we continue to draw out examples of this good practice so it is not hidden in the shadows of the day-to-day challenges faced by the Probation Service.

Work of the Inspectorate:

We are planning to start a programme of approved premises inspections next year, with the aim of highlighting the quality of work in approved premises. We have completed external consultations, and further work on the framework development is taking place.

There has been pressure on the number of places available in approved premises which are key for managing higher risk offenders back into the community. This pressure has increased following the introduction of the Probation Reset and the SDS40 scheme. Therefore, this is a key area which should be closely monitored.

Towards the end of this year, we will be consulting on our next thematic and inspection programme and future research priorities, so please do keep an eye out for this on our website and social media platforms - we are always keen to hear views on areas where the Inspectorate should be focusing its work.

I would also like to take the time to highlight our new equity, diversity and inclusion strategy, which was recently launched on our website. An equitable, diverse, and inclusive workforce provides opportunities for real strength and endurance.

Our mission statement sets out our commitment to driving forward positive change in equity, diversity and inclusion. We have set out an action plan to ensure we can deliver on our objectives. And we are focused on how we develop relationships between colleagues to create a truly inclusive place to work.

SDS 40:

I want to conclude by talking about the SDS 40 changes.

I have already publicly praised our front-line officers for their work preparing for the SDS 40 changes. I described these efforts as heroic, and I am happy to repeat that here.

However, while I have commended the efforts made, I have also highlighted the impact of this additional pressure on the Probation Service as just as severe as that on our prisons.

It is essential the impacts of the SDS40 scheme on the Probation Service are monitored and managed. We have inevitably seen issues, for example around accommodation and tagging, but it is important for me to emphasise that there is only so much the Service can do under the circumstances and in the time given.

Moving forward, my Inspectorate will play a key role in monitoring how the SDS 40 scheme - we will shine a light on what is working and what isn't.

But with a new Government comes new opportunities.

As part of the Sentencing Review, I am encouraging government to look at what we are asking the Probation Service to do and questioning whether there are aspects that could be removed from the Service to give practitioners additional time, rather than stretching them to unsustainable levels. This may require choices to be made on where its finite resources should be focused.

But there is opportunity if the right choices are made.

Good probation practice helps to keep communities safe and reduces reoffending. The Probation Service has an important role to play in supervision of the most dangerous and complex people. Therefore, it is essential that the Probation Service has the resources to better match its workload.

We know from the evidence that having a place to live, the opportunity for employment, help with drugs, alcohol or mental health problems and support in the community, are key to reducing reoffending.

If we have better resources and support and a more confident probation service, we will see better supervision in the community and greater confidence in community sentences.

If we get probation right, we could see:

- Better support to strike at the underlying causes of offending (drugs/alcohol/mental health/unemployment)
- Less reoffending and less recall (which costs us c£600m per annum)
- More changed lives
- Safer communities.

To achieve change we undoubtedly need to invest more in probation to help better manage people in the community and keep the public safe.

My Inspectorate will continue working to provide the scrutiny and evidence needed to drive positive change. I will continue to shine a light not just on where services need to make improvements, but also on where we can highlight effective practice and drive change.