



HM Inspectorate
of Probation

Response to our consultation on national probation inspection standards

V1.1 December 2024

Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Consultation questions.....	4
3. Summary of responses	5
4. Summary of HM Inspectorate of Probation decisions	8
5. Annex one: National probation inspection standards.....	12

1. Introduction

In November 2024 we consulted with our stakeholders about whether and how we should undertake a national inspection of probation. In our consultation we asked for your views on our proposed standards for national probation inspections, as well as how we should rate those inspections. We received 14 responses to our consultation and this has been incredibly helpful to us in finalising our approach.

We will undertake our first national inspection in early 2025. Our aim is to focus on the things that make a difference to regions and probation delivery units (PDUs), to identify both enablers and blockers, and thereby identify opportunities to improve delivery of probation services. We believe that a national inspection alongside our regional and PDU inspections will provide a comprehensive picture of the impact of national arrangements. In order to best drive improvements, we need to be able to target recommendations, based on a comprehensive picture, where they will have the greatest impact. Inspecting the national arrangements for delivering probation services, alongside our existing regional and PDU inspections, will enable us to best drive improvements.

We will inspect the national arrangements for probation delivery against four standards for which we will award ratings. We will look at national leadership, arrangements for staffing, the provision of services and the infrastructure that is in place to support regions and PDUs to best deliver work with people on probation. Our ratings will continue to follow our established four-point scale and we will also provide an overall rating. We will make recommendations to drive improvement, targeting them where we believe they can have the most impact. We will publish our findings.

Hearing from our stakeholders is important to us. Thank you for taking the time to respond to our consultation.



Martin Jones CBE

HM Chief Inspector of Probation

2. Consultation questions

We asked the following nine questions:

Question 1 – *Should HM Inspectorate of Probation undertake a national inspection?*

Question 2 – *Is our focus on how national arrangements and activity enable the effective delivery of probation services the right approach?*

Question 3 – *Are ICT and facilities the right elements of infrastructure for us to focus on?*

Question 4 – *Does the standards framework overall cover the key national areas that contribute to the effective delivery of probation services? If not, what is missing?*

Question 5 – *Are any of the proposed prompts insufficiently linked to effective service delivery? If so, which ones?*

Question 6 – *Are any of the proposed prompts insufficiently precise? If so, which ones?*

Question 7 – *Should we rate individual standards in our national inspections?*

Question 8 – *Should we award an overall rating for national inspections?*

Question 9 – *Is there anything in our proposed standards or the way we suggest we will produce ratings that you think could lead to undesirable behaviours, outputs or outcomes? If so, please tell us.*

3. Summary of responses

The online consultation opened on 25 October 2024 and closed on 11 November 2024. We received 14 responses. The consultation document remains on our website.¹ Some responses were from organisations, and others were from individuals answering in their personal or professional capacity.

Question 1 – Should HM Inspectorate of Probation undertake a national inspection?

The majority of respondents supported the inspectorate's proposal to undertake a national inspection:

'Yes. A significant amount of regional strategy and subsequent delivery is a result of national policy and strategy. Regions are not as independent as would be assumed and to identify a whole system approach to operational delivery the strategic drivers and influences need to be examined at national level to illustrate organisational direction at national level against regional level implementation.'

and

'Yes. There are common factors outside of regions control that are preventing the delivery of quality services in Probation Regions and this need identifying and recommendations putting in place at a national level.'

Some respondents supported the national inspection but with caveats around the scope of the inspection and the potential duplication of pre-existing work:

'Some of this work also risks duplicating audits already conducted by the Government Internal Audit Agency and proposed audit from the National Audit Office, so can this be checked beforehand.'

Question 2 – Is our focus on how national arrangements and activity enable the effective delivery of probation services the right approach?

The majority of respondents supported the proposed approach:

'Yes – we believe that an inspection will be useful to determine the effectiveness of national structures to assist delivery by the regions.'

Question 3 – Are ICT and facilities the right elements of infrastructure for us to focus on?

The majority of respondents supported the proposed approach:

'ICT has been a long standing issue in probation with case management systems not always supporting the work of probation services. The last 5 years has seen the addition of multiple digital tools for probation practitioners to use, many of which duplicate effort and do not interact with each other. It is right that it is looked at to see if this perceived data harvesting actually contributes to the role of the probation practitioner or hinders it.'

¹ HM Inspectorate of Probation (2024). [A consultation on standards and ratings for a national inspection of the Probation Service.](#)

'In relation to facilities, the environments in which we work in and people on probation report to contribute to staff wellbeing, morale and the service user experience. Some of these facilities are not conducive to rehabilitation, and they play a key factor in the services that we deliver.'

Question 4 – Does the standards framework overall cover the key national areas that contribute to the effective delivery of probation services? If not, what is missing?

The majority of respondents supported the proposed approach:

'Overall, the standards are appropriate and cover the key national areas... It is positive to see emphasis on the voice of users of our services.'

and

'Yes, the framework that has been developed is comprehensive enough to cover the need to consider the strategic vision for the probation service, the issues related to recruiting and retaining staff, the channels of decision-making through to the local PDU level, and the need to think critically about the strength and contribution of partnership arrangements to supporting effective practice.'

Question 5 – Are any of the proposed prompts insufficiently linked to effective service delivery? If so, which ones?

The majority of respondents supported the proposed approach. One respondent made suggestions where we inspect the culture of the service, to include professional identity and what it means to staff to work for the service.

'The prompts underneath the culture question are not sufficient to measure organisational culture. We suggest including questions around professional identity and what it means to work for the service.'

Question 6 – Are any of the proposed prompts insufficiently precise? If so, which ones?

One respondent felt that the prompts needed to be more specific and made some suggestions:

'N.1.4 c) The question pre-supposes a shared understanding of the notion of learning 'systematically'. It is possible to imagine – and we have seen evidence through our research – of a range of ways in which systematic learning could be pursued; which might lean primarily upon research, theory, and/or staff-led ideas and leaders' efforts to utilise these to develop policy and explain decisions to staff.'

Question 7 – Should we rate individual standards in our national inspections?

All respondents could see the value in rating individual standards:

'Yes. Given regions and PDUs are almost entirely driven by national directive this seems appropriate.'

Question 8 – Should we award an overall rating for national inspections?

This question generated a broad mixture of views. Six of the 14 respondents felt that an overall rating should be awarded:

'A national rating would serve as a benchmark for the existing inspections and also a baseline for a future inspection.'

and

'One-word ratings can be unhelpful and require review.'

Three of the 14 respondents felt that an overall rating should not be awarded:

'The national work will inevitably impact each region/area different, and therefore an overall rating loses meaning.'

and

'No. A single rating is not constructive for strengthening good practice or driving improvement where required. A single "rating" could be replaced by a sentence/paragraph summarising the overall assessment e.g., strengths, areas for improvement and any salient contextual remarks.'

Five of the 14 respondents took a more nuanced approach:

'Caution should be exercised when considering this. An overall rating can detract from the messaging in the standards. An overall rating may also negatively impact on accountability, each standard is more likely to have a natural owner.'

and

'This mirrors the regional arrangements and provides a benchmark for a reinspection at a later point, however for the national inspection to potentially rate better than the regions would further negatively impact staff.'

and

'Yes, we agree with ratings being awarded – but we should move away from one word ratings.'

Question 9 – Is there anything in our proposed standards or the way we suggest we will produce ratings that you think could lead to undesirable behaviours, outputs or outcomes? If so, please tell us.

None of the respondents felt that there was anything specific about our standards that would lead to undesirable outcomes:

'No – if items suggested above can be incorporated then a complete assessment will be made.'

There were a number of general comments about national inspection:

'My only concern at this time, is if the Inspection leads to a negative outcome, the impact on the relationship between Regions and National Teams could be compromised. The approach and communication around the inspection needs to limit the danger of creating an 'us and them' culture, hence why I feel there needs to be an emphasis within the narrative on the collaboration between HQ and regions.'

and

'There is the risk that poor practice performance could be attributed to a national deficit highlighted in this inspection.'

4. Summary of HM Inspectorate of Probation decisions

Following a review of all the consultation feedback, along with extensive testing through pilot inspections, we have made the following decisions.

	Question	Post-consultation decision
1	Should HM Inspectorate of Probation undertake a national inspection?	<p>We will undertake a national inspection. We will comment through our standards framework on the sufficiency of national arrangements to support, enable and drive the effective delivery of probation services by regions and PDUs. We will be interested in the relationship between what happens at a national level and how this links to the effective delivery of probation services.</p> <p>The first national inspection will take place in early 2025. We expect that we will undertake further national inspections. We will continue to work with other organisations, such as the National Audit Office, to ensure congruence between our national inspection and any work that they are undertaking.</p>
2	Is our focus on how national arrangements and activity enable the effective delivery of probation services the right approach?	<p>Through our national inspection standards, we will focus on how the arrangements and activity at a national level influence the effective delivery of probation services in regions and PDUs. Findings from our national inspection, taken with regional and PDU inspection findings, will enable us to provide a complete picture of probation delivery.</p> <p>Findings from our inspection of case work in the national inspection will be used as evidence of the impact of national activity and arrangements, alongside other sources of qualitative evidence that we gather in advance of and during inspection fieldwork.</p>
3	Are ICT and facilities the right elements of infrastructure for us to focus on?	<p>We will proceed as planned with a standard that focuses on infrastructure. Effective infrastructure is vital for the effective delivery of probation services. Within this standard, we will focus on ICT and facilities and ask questions and prompts about how well the activity and arrangements in these areas support the regions and PDUs in their delivery of probation services.</p>

	Question	Post-consultation decision
4	<p>Does the standards framework overall cover the key national areas that contribute to the effective delivery of probation services? If not, what is missing?</p>	<p>Our standards, key questions and prompts outline the high-level areas that we will focus on in our national inspection. A comprehensive set of rules and guidance is in place for each prompt. This includes the details about where we expect to find evidence, what we expect to see from evidence, and how we judge sufficiency for each individual prompt.</p> <p>The standards framework, when taken with the detail provided by the rules and guidance, provides a clear and detailed picture of the key national areas that contribute to the effective delivery of probation services.</p>
5	<p>Are any of the proposed prompts insufficiently linked to effective service delivery? If so, which ones?</p>	<p>Our standards will form the basis for a transparent and independent national inspection. Our standards, key questions and prompts are coherent, sufficiently comprehensive and balanced. They are sufficiently discrete and will support fair and transparent inspection judgements.</p> <p>All the key questions and prompts will have a binary yes or no response. A number of prompts were amended to reflect the consultation responses that we received. All of the proposed prompts can be linked directly to the effective delivery of probation services. Inspectors will cross-reference evidence from inspected cases to evidence derived during the national fieldwork to ensure the link between national activity and effective service delivery is fully considered. A number of the prompts now include specific guidance in relation to activity to create and maintain a professional identity for probation practitioners.</p>
6	<p>Are any of the proposed prompts insufficiently precise? If so, which ones?</p>	<p>We have considered the suggested changes to our prompts. The suggested changes did not sufficiently capture the intention of the key questions that sit above the prompts. As a result, we have not amended the prompts but have instead used the feedback from the consultation to strengthen the rules and guidance that sit beneath the prompts.</p> <p>The standards framework, when taken with the detail provided by the rules and guidance, provides details about what we expect to see and how we judge the evidence in each prompt.</p>

	Question	Post-consultation decision
7	<p>Should we rate individual standards in our national inspections?</p>	<p>We will rate the four individual standards <i>N.1 Leadership and Governance</i>, <i>N.2 Staffing</i>, <i>N.3 Services</i> and <i>N.4 Infrastructure</i> based on the evidence that we see in the national inspection. Each standard will be rated on the four-point scale 'Outstanding', 'Good', 'Requires improvement' and 'Inadequate'. This is consistent with how we rate individual domain one standards in our regional and PDU inspections.</p> <p>Cases inspected as part of the national fieldwork will be inspected against our current PDU domain two standards. The evidence from cases will be used to identify the enablers of and barriers to effective service delivery at national level.</p> <p>We will present the case inspection data as a single national data set. We will report a percentage score that is indicative of an 'Outstanding', 'Good', 'Requires improvement' or 'Inadequate' rating for the fieldwork data. This should not be compared with case inspection data from regional or PDU inspections, as there are a number of differences, including our sampling approach, the time period of cases that we will inspect and our approach to case inspection, which will not include interviews with practitioners for the national inspection.</p>
8	<p>Should we award an overall rating for national inspections?</p>	<p>We will award an overall rating for national inspections calculated from the four standards. This aligns with our approach to inspecting regions and PDUs. We recognise that some respondents were concerned about a negative impact on regions and PDUs should the national overall rating appear to be better than the overall regional and PDU ratings. We will ensure through our narrative and recommendations that the overall national rating is fully explained through our narrative, including where national arrangements and activity impact both positively and negatively on the ability of regions and PDUs to deliver frontline services effectively. We will ensure that recommendations are appropriately targeted.</p> <p>Each of the four core national standards will be scored on a scale of 0 to 3, in which 'Inadequate' = 0; 'Requires improvement' = 1; 'Good' = 2; and 'Outstanding' = 3. We will calculate the overall national inspection rating by adding up the scores for the four standards to produce a total score ranging</p>

	Question	Post-consultation decision
		<p>from 0 to 12, which will be banded to produce the overall rating, as follows:</p> <p>0–2 = Inadequate</p> <p>3–6 = Requires improvement</p> <p>7–10 = Good</p> <p>11–12 = Outstanding</p>
9	<p>Is there anything in our proposed standards or the way we suggest we will produce ratings that you think could lead to undesirable behaviours, outputs or outcomes? If so, please tell us.</p>	<p>As nothing was identified that could lead to undesirable behaviours, outputs or outcomes, we will proceed with our national inspection in early 2025. The national inspection standards are contained in full at annex one.</p>

5. Annex one: National probation inspection standards

N.1. Leadership and Governance

National leadership and governance arrangements drive the effective delivery of probation services.

N.1.1 Do national strategic arrangements support the effective delivery of probation services?

- a) Is there a national evidence-based vision and strategy for the probation service?
- b) Is there a national delivery plan that supports the delivery of the vision and strategy?
- c) Do national governance arrangements effectively support the delivery of the vision and strategy?
- d) Are strong and well-maintained collaborative arrangements in place with HMPPS and cross-government partners?

N.1.2 Does national leadership activity support the effective delivery of probation services?

- a) Does the national operating model enable regions to take a deliberate, strategic, and informed approach to meeting diverse needs?
- b) Do national leaders ensure the effective implementation of policies?
- c) Does national leadership activity support and enhance regional and PDU leadership?
- d) When implementing national changes, is the impact on service delivery, including equality impact, assessed, and appropriate action taken?

N.1.3 Does the national culture support the effective delivery of probation services?

- a) Is there effective national communication to regions and PDUs that supports the effective delivery of probation services?
- b) Are regions and PDUs enabled to be responsive to feedback from staff and people on probation?
- c) Does the culture of the probation service promote openness, constructive challenge, and ideas?
- d) Is there a sufficient focus at the national level on staff wellbeing?

N.1.4 Do national leaders use analysis, evidence, and learning to support the effective delivery of probation services?

- a) Are comprehensive national assurance arrangements in place that support the effective delivery of probation services?
- b) Is there a sufficient national understanding of performance and quality across the probation service and at all levels?
- c) Do national leaders learn systematically?
- d) Do national leaders understand and use equity, diversity and inclusion information to drive improvement?
- e) Do national leaders seek, analyse and use the views of people on probation at a national level to review and improve services?
- f) Are probation services improved through evaluation and development of the underlying evidence base?

N.2. Staffing

National arrangements for staffing enable the effective delivery of probation services.

N.B. *Staffing refers to all staff, including administration roles, practitioners and managers.*

N.2.1 Do national workload management arrangements support the effective delivery of probation services?

- a) Do national resourcing arrangements ensure manageable workloads for regional and PDU staff?
- b) Do national resource management tools support regions and PDUs to effectively manage staff workloads?
- c) Are regions and PDUs given appropriate authority and support to manage workloads in response to local pressures?

N.2.2 Do national recruitment and retention arrangements support regions and PDUs to deliver effective probation services?

- a) Do national recruitment and retention arrangements ensure the provision of sufficient numbers of staff to regions and PDU?
- b) Do national recruitment and retention arrangements ensure the provision of staff with the right skills to regions and PDU?
- c) Do national recruitment and retention arrangements support the achievement of a diverse workforce?
- d) Are national recruitment arrangements efficient?

N.2.3 Do national learning and development arrangements support regions and PDUs to effectively deliver probation services?

- a) Is a culture of learning and continuous improvement promoted actively at a national level?
- b) Do policies, strategies and arrangements for learning and development support the effective delivery of probation services?
- c) Do national learning and development arrangements ensure that staff are sufficiently skilled, competent and experienced?
- d) Is the impact of learning and development evaluated and changes made in response?

N.3. Services

National arrangements drive the effective delivery of a comprehensive range of probation services.

N.3.1 Is there a complete and up-to-date national analysis of the profile of people on probation that enables the effective delivery of a comprehensive range of probation services?

- a) Does the analysis capture sufficiently the desistance and offending-related factors presented by people on probation?
- b) Does the analysis capture sufficiently the risk of harm profile of people on probation?
- c) Does the analysis pay sufficient attention to diversity factors and to issues of disproportionality?

- d) Is there sufficient analysis of local patterns of offending and sentencing?
- e) Does the analysis inform national delivery planning and resourcing?

N.3.2 Do national arrangements ensure the provision of a sufficient range and volume of probation services?

- a) Are the right partnerships in place and operating effectively at a national level to effectively deliver probation services?
- b) Are national arrangements for the provision of services well understood by regions and PDUs?
- c) Do national arrangements for the provision of services meet the needs of regions and PDUs?
- d) Is appropriate authority delegated to regions and PDUs in relation to contracting with partner agencies and managing their performance?
- e) Do national arrangements promote effective collaborative working between service providers and probation practitioners?
- f) Is building strengths and enhancing protective factors central to the national commissioning and delivery of services?
- g) Is public protection central to the national commissioning and delivery of services?
- h) Are equity, diversity and inclusion factors and issues of disproportionality addressed sufficiently in the way that services are nationally commissioned and delivered?
- i) Are national arrangements for the provision of services informed by regular robust evidence-based monitoring, evaluation, and review?

N.4. Infrastructure

Infrastructure supports the effective delivery of probation services.

N.4.1 Do facilities support the effective delivery of probation services?

- a) Do national arrangements ensure that premises and offices support the delivery of appropriate personalised work and effective engagement?
- b) Do national arrangements provide safe environments for the effective delivery of services?
- c) Do national arrangements provide accessible environments for the effective delivery of services?

N.4.2 Do ICT systems enable regions and PDUs to deliver probation services effectively?

- a) Do ICT systems enable staff to plan, deliver and record their work in a timely way?
- b) Do ICT systems enable staff to access information appropriately and reliably?
- c) Do ICT systems enable effective information exchange with partners?
- d) Do ICT systems support remote working where required?
- e) Do ICT systems support the production of the necessary management information?
- f) Are regions and PDUs supported to find local ICT solutions where these may be needed?