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HM Inspectorate
of Probation



AN HM INSPECTORATE OF PROBATION EFFECTIVE PRACTICE GUIDE

Effective practice guide

Recruitment, Training, and Retention

Based on a thematic inspection of the recruitment, training, and retention of frontline practitioners

February 2025

Acknowledgements

This effective practice guide is based on information sourced while undertaking '[A thematic inspection of the recruitment, training, and retention of frontline practitioners](#)' and work arising from key lines of enquiry. The inspection was led by HM Inspector Noreen Wallace, supported by a team of inspectors and operations, research, communications, and corporate staff. The manager responsible for this inspection programme is Helen Davies.

In collaboration with Helen Amor, effective practice lead, Noreen Wallace has drawn out examples of effective practice relating to recruitment, training, and retention. These are presented in this guide to support the continuous development of these areas in the probation regions.

We would like to thank all those who participated in any way in this inspection, and especially those who have contributed to this guide. Without their help and cooperation, the inspection and effective practice guide would not have been possible.

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The guide is aimed at a range of audiences; it is intended to support [the Probation Service](#) to reflect on organisational arrangements and consider how they may apply the salient learning points in their own contexts. Therefore, please use the contents page to navigate directly to the sections pertinent to you.

Introduction

About this guide

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation has a duty to identify and disseminate effective practice.¹

We assure the quality of youth justice and probation provision, and test its effectiveness. Critically, we make recommendations designed to highlight and disseminate best practice, challenge poor performance, and encourage providers to improve.

In this guide, we present examples of effective practice that support successful recruitment, ensure continuous professional development opportunities for staff, and promote positive retention in teams.

I extend my gratitude to all the areas that participated in this thematic inspection and contributed to the creation of this guide. These guides are published to complement our reports and the standards against which we inspect youth justice and probation services.

I hope this guide will be of interest to everyone working in probation and those seeking to make improvements in line with our thematic inspection. We welcome feedback on this and our other guides to ensure they remain as useful as possible for future readers.



Martin Jones

Martin Jones CBE

HM Chief Inspector of Probation

Contact us



We would love to hear what you think of this guide. Please send your comments and feedback on this guide, including its impact and any suggested improvements, to Helen.amor@hmiprobation.gov.uk.

Finding your way



Useful tools



Useful links



HM Inspectorate of Probation recorded interview



External video

¹ **For adult services** – Section 7 of the *Criminal Justice and Court Services Act (2000)*, as amended by the *Offender Management Act (2007)*, section 12(3)(a). **For youth services** – inspection and reporting on youth offending teams is established under section 39 of the *Crime and Disorder Act (1998)*.

Background

Staffing challenges have been a recurring issue in most of HM Inspectorate of Probation's recent core adult inspection reports. Since the reunification of probation services in June 2021 there have been ongoing staff shortages and difficulties with recruitment, training, and retention.

Recruitment campaigns have successfully attracted many candidates to the professional qualification in probation (PQiP) programme. At 30 September 2024, there were 1,641² full-time-equivalent (FTE)³ staff undertaking the qualification. However, the influx of new and inexperienced staff has placed pressure on managers and the already-strained probation officer grades, who are tasked with mentoring and supporting learners. Despite the recent recruitment efforts, inspections have consistently shown that many probation delivery units (PDUs) remain understaffed, with significant geographical disparities in staffing levels across England and Wales.

In recent thematic and core inspections, HM Inspectorate of Probation has made recommendations regarding the quality of training, due to the poor quality of casework found. The Probation Service has reviewed and redesigned aspects of its training offer, but this has yet to result in consistent improvements in the quality of work delivered.

Overall, while the number of practitioners increased over the past 12 months, further staffing challenges have persisted and continued to impact the service negatively. These have included staff retention and managing a less-experienced workforce, which have affected the service's ability to fully implement [The Target Operating Model](#).⁴

This guide seeks to share examples of effective practice on recruitment, training, and retention gathered while undertaking fieldwork across all probation regions in England and Wales for the thematic inspection.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-september-2024>

³ Full-time-equivalent (FTE) - measures how many total full-time employees or part-time employees add up to full-time employees in an organisation. [What Is Full-Time Equivalent \(FTE\)? \(With Example Calculation\)](#)

⁴ The target operating model provides information on the probation service's intentions of how probation system would work following reforms implemented in 2020. It outlines the structures and responsibilities of probation and its partners, how the system intends to support people under probation supervision and transition planning.

Our standards: what we looked for and our expectations



The examples in this guide are drawn from evidence of effective practice identified while undertaking fieldwork for the thematic inspection.

We define effective practice as:



"where we see our standards delivered well in practice, with our standards being based on established models and frameworks, which are grounded in evidence, learning, and experience."

During our inspection, we identified effective practice against the standards below:



[You can read the HM Inspectorate of Probation thematic report here.](#)



Reflection questions

Reflecting on this section:

- How far does your work align with the standards and the expectations above?
- If there are any areas where these are not aligned, what actions could you take to address this?
- Where they are aligned, how can you ensure you sustain this practice?

Recruitment

Successful recruitment and retention require a multi-faceted strategy that sets out a strong employer identity, which in turn equips potential candidates to understand the organisation and role they are applying for. Recruitment should provide a positive candidate experience, and employers should utilise diverse recruitment channels and methods to reach a broad talent pool. Ensuring cultural fit and offering competitive salary levels, benefits, and career development opportunities are crucial for attracting and retaining high-quality staff. Emphasising training and development can also appeal to ambitious candidates looking for growth within organisations.

In this section we highlight some examples that probation regions have employed which support effective recruitment.

Workforce planning

Probation recruitment is driven by the probation workforce strategy 2023–2025 (HMPPS, 2023). Regions are required to undertake workforce planning activities to understand their current staffing picture as well as forecasting future needs. In our thematic inspection we found mixed views about the current processes that support this work. We have recommended that, following consultation, the Probation Service should provide regions with user-friendly workforce planning tools which provide a consistent national approach to understanding local staffing profiles and adequately support workforce planning. One example of a regionally developed system that was found to be effective for a range of users is provided below.

Example of effectiveness: MyPDU, Yorkshire and the Humber

The Yorkshire and the Humber region developed an advanced digital workforce planning (WFP) tool called 'MyPDU', as the national tool did not provide sufficient opportunities to analyse and interrogate staffing information to support WFP effectively. This tool managed a comprehensive dataset, taking a five-strand strategic approach to people management using the acronym 'WHEEL':

- **W**orkforce planning
- **H**ealth and wellbeing
- **E**quality, diversity, inclusion, and belonging
- **E**ngagement
- **L**earning and development.



Key features:

- **Data insights:** to analyse staffing trends, including experience, tenure, vacancy rates, turnover, and demographics.
- **Forecasting:** to forecast future regional staffing needs more accurately than national systems.
- **Real-time updates:** managers continuously updated the system, ensuring it remained current and more reliable than national databases.
- **Customisable views:** to access information at different levels, such as by PDU, staff grade or other relevant variables, to meet specific user needs.

The lead finance business partner told us:

"I use MyPDU to review the FTE figures for each month remaining in the year, gain a more accurate view of attrition - including real known recruitment which was forecast based on planned start dates - and estimate internal and external PQiP numbers based on historic data and current trends. The information on MyPDU enables us to quickly reduce the forecast and provide evidence for our assumptions. I can now do real-time checks on recruitment, start dates, and attrition. This helps me to change my [WFP] modelling each month and makes my financial forecast more accurate."

The head of the probation delivery unit noted:

"I find MyPDU to be a fantastic resource for a PDU head. I can access information at the touch of a button to assist me in WFP, wellbeing, learning and development, and inclusion. The wealth of information would take me hours to access separately from different systems ... it is all in one place, which enables me to be more effective and use the information to inform decisions about service delivery in the PDU. Furthermore, the team can make changes and adapt the tool to suit what's needed ... this flexibility is important for adapting and delivering at pace against changing operational demands."

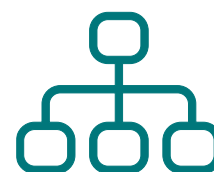
'MyPDU' provided a sophisticated and up-to-date approach to WFP, enabling better decision-making and strategic planning for the region.

Recruitment processes

In 2019, the Council of Europe issued *Guidelines Regarding Recruitment, Selection, Education, Training and Professional Development of Prison and Probation Staff*. The guidelines set out that:

"A clear job description should be provided, outlining the mission of the organisation, the aims, duties, and responsibilities of the post as well as the selection criteria and conditions of employment. Advertisement of the vacant post should take place on a range of media platforms including printed, radio/TV and social media. A designated point for requesting additional information could be considered to orient candidates at entry and give them a realistic perception of the work." (Council of Europe, 2019, p.4)

The guidelines also state that the advertising should outline the training that will be provided and the opportunities the role offers for professional development, to encourage suitable candidates to apply and foster staff retention. In addition, the guidelines encourage



the opportunity for prospective candidates, where possible, to make on-site visits to familiarise themselves with the role. During our inspection, newly appointed staff told us that they did not always feel the advertising had given them a clear understanding of the roles they were taking on. During inspection focus groups, we heard about several regional initiatives to drive understanding of the role of the Probation Service before candidates applied, and efforts to ensure that a diverse range of potential candidates were attracted to the role.

When PQiP campaigns opened, there were a range of webinars and question-and-answer sessions that candidates could join to understand more about the work of the service. Although some new recruits we met were not aware of these sessions, most of those who had attended had found them valuable. One told us:

"I was leaving a role I had been in for 25 years, so I did a lot of research and attended two online events. I got email addresses that I could contact for information too. I felt that I had a good level of information. The events were helpful, went through the expectations, and it spurred me on to keep on with the process."

All candidates should be directed to these events and encouraged to attend.

During fieldwork for our thematic inspection, many new probation service officers (PSOs) and PQiP recruits told us they felt ill informed about the roles they had commenced, which for some meant they did not intend to stay. Some regions took steps to promote working for the Probation Service by attending work fairs or college open days. Student placements have also been used. For example, since 2018, London probation service, in partnership with Greenwich University, successfully ran student placement programmes for final-year criminology undergraduates. Students completed 150 hours of work experience over two academic terms, with approximately eight students placed in probation settings so far. Three of these students secured roles within the Probation Service post-placement.

In the East of England, we heard about the following scheme to provide student placements.

Example of effectiveness: University student placements, East of England

During the 2023/2024 academic year, the East of England probation region offered placements to final-year students studying criminology, criminal psychology or equivalent subjects at the University of Bedfordshire. These placements, which contributed towards their degree, were voluntary, with travel and subsistence costs covered by the service. A locally agreed application process, interviews, and vetting were in place. Students needed to pass security vetting to participate.

Activities during the placement were tailored to the needs of the PDU and the interests of the students, ensuring tasks were meaningful and not overly burdensome to staff. Students carried out observations, attended staff meetings, visited service users and courts, and engaged with various staff members to integrate themselves into the workplace culture. Criminology course leaders coordinated with supervisors to finalise placement details and tasks.

The programme offered students real-world experience in the criminal justice field, valuable CV additions, and reflective opportunities for their coursework, potentially paving the way for future careers in the Probation Service.



[Here you can view the presentation developed by East of England probation region about student placements at the University of Bedfordshire.](#)



The following link outlines the HMPPS process to follow in relation to vetting when considering implementation of schemes such as university placements: [His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service | Non-Directly Employed \(NDE\) workers \(sscl.com\)](#)

For PSOs, recruitment has been conducted locally through regional campaigns or with support from the national resourcing team. Most often, national support has been provided to regions identified as hard to recruit to. During our inspection, opinions on the effectiveness of national support were mixed, with some regions appreciating the support while others found it insufficiently responsive to local needs. Regions that had found the support effective most valued flexibility in the offer; for example, some required support with the advertising and administration, but wanted to retain control over sifting, interviewing, and placement of recruits.

The London region was positive about the support it had received, as reported below.

Example of effectiveness: National recruitment support, London

Since 2022, the London region had accessed additional support from the central recruitment team to advertise and recruit for business-critical roles, such as PSO, probation officers (POs), and administrative roles. Due to the region's large area, this central support allowed London to maintain a consistent and continuous high-volume recruitment. Additional benefits included a standardised approach, expedited vetting, and creating a London region on the recruitment systems to capture all locations when advertising roles. Through good relationships with the national central recruitment team, the London region reported it had achieved and continued to achieve consistency in recruitment, and reduced the time for recruitment campaigns and processes.

Addressing disproportionality in recruitment

The staffing profile of the Probation Service shows that 75.7 per cent of probation staff were women, and 18.3 per cent of those who had declared their ethnicity were from ethnic minorities (15.2 per cent of staff had not disclosed).⁵ During our thematic inspection fieldwork, we found that success rates for men and people from ethnic minorities during the recruitment process were lower than for women and white candidates, and the reasons for this were not fully understood. Academic research into the feminisation of probation work has offered some potential reasons; for example, Tidmarsh (2024) suggested that low starting salaries had failed to attract those seeking to start a second career and, as a result:

"The typical entrant is a recently qualified graduate who comes through the 'pipeline' from university-level social science courses to probation. That these degrees are also women-dominated (HESA, 2022) has resulted in what many informants problematised as a lack of life experience in probation, putting much of the workforce at odds with the nature of its predominantly male caseload."

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-september-2024>

While Tidmarsh concluded that the over-representation of women within probation work was not necessarily problematic, more needed to be done to understand this phenomenon to ensure the service was as diverse as possible, and represented community demographics.

During our fieldwork we found examples of initiatives aimed at increasing diversity, which we have shared below.

Example of effectiveness: Opportunities for veterans, HMPPS

HMPPS has offered tailored career opportunities for people leaving the armed forces and veterans. The Advance into Justice scheme was initially piloted in June 2023 to recruit prison officers. The scheme then expanded to include probation roles, recognising that veterans were likely to have strong transferable skills suited to work in criminal justice. Veterans could join through two schemes: Advance into Justice, which supported those leaving aiming to secure a job before leaving the military, or a guaranteed interview scheme for veterans.

The Advance into Justice scheme offered opportunities for veterans with a two-year fixed-term contract and potential for permanent roles. Roles available included prison officers, youth justice workers, and probation services officers. Suitable candidates were offered home-to-work mileage and resettlement support of up to £12,000, which could also help facilitate recruitment in hard-to-reach areas of England and Wales.

To support their transition, candidates were offered assistance pre- and post-employment. One of the aims of this initiative was to increase the number of men working within HMPPS. To date, although numbers recruited through the scheme are small, this is a promising initiative to support recruitment and diversity within the Probation Service.



You can learn more about the Advance into Justice scheme via this link:

[Jobs for veterans – Prison and Probation Jobs](#)

Example of effectiveness: Positive action officer, Wales

Leaders in Wales recognised that more needed to be done to promote diversity in their workforce and to ensure that the Probation Service adequately reflected the communities it served.

In February 2023, HMPPS Wales appointed a positive action officer to enhance outreach and engagement with diverse communities across Wales, with the aim to better represent the communities in which the Probation Service served, and achieve national ethnicity benchmarks.

A partnership with the Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team (EYST), an ethnic minority-led organisation with a Wales-wide presence, bolstered these efforts. This collaboration increased community confidence and awareness of career opportunities within HMPPS Wales, addressing common barriers for candidates. Initiatives included a 'buddy' scheme that paired existing staff with prospective candidates to support their application journey, large-scale engagement events nationwide, sessions in schools, colleges, and community groups, and drop-in career clinics at community venues.



In 2022, the Criminal Justice Board for Wales launched its anti-racism plan, committing all criminal justice agencies in Wales to dedicate resources for positive action work. An all-Wales positive action forum was established to enhance collaboration and maximise value for money.

Since the introduction of the positive action officer role in Wales, there has been an increase in applications for probation roles from ethnic minority individuals, a rise in successful appointments of candidates receiving positive action support, and positive feedback from community partners. This feedback indicated growing trust, confidence, and perception of HMPPS as an employer of choice.

During our inspection a senior manager reflected:

"This was a really positive experience in Gwent. [The positive action officer] has come along to local schools, colleges, recruitment fairs, job centres. We have more male staff in Gwent. My deputy is a male officer, and he was leading the conversations when the advert went out. More PQiP men are being recruited than before. [The positive action officer] is really well connected with us and invested time to understand the community."



You can learn more about the Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team here: [Ethnic minorities and youth support team website.](#)



This video provides an overview of the positive action officer role in Wales. [Video \(YouTube, 5:15\) Effective Practice – Positive Action Officer, Wales \(HM Inspectorate of Probation\)](#)



For more information on positive action in Wales, please contact Wales Diversity and Inclusion Team@justice.gov.uk

Example of effectiveness: Social mobility ambassadors, Wales

As part of its commitment to increasing social mobility within the department and the wider civil service, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has developed a national school outreach programme, aimed to raise awareness, build confidence, and enhance the career aspirations of young people from diverse backgrounds as they transition from school to employment.

The programme targeted students attending state-funded, non-fee-paying schools where at least 20 per cent of students were eligible for free school meals. Staff who volunteered as social mobility ambassadors in Wales participated in events at these schools, offering students insights into careers within the Probation Service.

Launched in Wales in 2018, the programme has seen ambassadors engage in various activities, including delivering presentations, participating in mock interviews, and attending careers fairs. Feedback from both schools and volunteers was positive.

Currently, 110 schools across Wales are involved, with 101 staff volunteering as social mobility ambassadors. In 2024, a total of 52 events were attended across Wales.



The MoJ intranet has further accessible information on social mobility: [Social mobility - Ministry of Justice HQ Intranet;](#)



You can contact the MoJ for further information via this mailbox: socialmobility@justice.gov.uk



Reflection questions

For recruiting managers:

- Are workforce planning tools being used effectively to analyse workforce demographics and identify opportunities to address disproportionality?
- What more can be done to help candidates understand the roles they are applying for?
- What additional actions can be taken to support workforce diversity?

Key take-aways:

Successful recruitment requires:



analytical use of data to understand staffing needs and profile, with longer term analysis to track the success of different approaches to recruitment to fully understand what works



supporting candidates to fully understand the roles they are applying for to support job satisfaction and retention



close monitoring of how **candidates with protected characteristics** progress through the recruitment process and actions to address disproportionality



rigorous assessment of applicants' skills and abilities to determine suitability for role, including their resilience and potential to work in an emotionally demanding position.

New staff induction



Academic research has provided compelling evidence that employee induction plays a crucial role in staff retention. By investing in well-structured and engaging induction programmes, organisations can reap the benefits of a more satisfied, productive, and loyal workforce (*Harvard Business Review*, 2024). This research suggested that induction programmes should prioritise immersing new recruits into the organisational culture by socialising them into the company's values, mission, and ethos. This cultural integration helped new employees align with the organisation's identity and feel a sense of belonging from the start. A well-structured induction eased anxiety by providing essential information about roles, the organisation, and colleagues, making new recruits more comfortable and confident. It facilitated quicker integration by familiarising employees with their responsibilities, team dynamics, and procedures, enhancing productivity. While technical skills and processes were important, the primary focus should be on cultural immersion to build a strong foundation for future contributions.

During our inspection we heard from regions about the ways in which they strived to support new recruits into the organisation, and offered formalised and meaningful induction during their initial weeks and months of joining.

Practitioners welcomed having a structured induction; when this was not in place, they described being in a new organisation without clear expectations about what they needed to do as uncomfortable and, in some cases, it made them question whether they wanted to stay. Induction activities must be appropriately sequenced to ensure that new starters have sufficient context to make sense of each learning point or experience. In some areas, a valued aspect of induction was observation activities focused on different stages of how people progressed through the criminal justice system (CJS), and the points at which the Probation Service became involved. When staff reported a poor induction experience, this often related to training starting before they felt properly inducted, for example, being directed to attend training events too early before they had sufficient context. Below are some examples of inductions that attracted positive feedback.

Example of effectiveness: Eight-week induction, Yorkshire and the Humber

Yorkshire and the Humber region developed an eight-week induction process for all staff coming into the organisation. New starters joined in groups, which fostered a culture of support and allowed them to get to know colleagues in roles and teams other than their own. Each cohort had a Microsoft Teams channel which aided discussion and information sharing. The region made use of automated systems to ensure new starters received information staggered at the right time during their induction period to avoid overload. Mandatory learning was included in the expectations for the induction period, which ensured it was completed. Other training events were scheduled so that new starters were clear about their timetables for the whole period. In addition, the induction process introduced new starters to different teams and departments to support them in gaining a full understanding of regional structure and probation work. Managers had a checklist to track new starters' progress and prompt discussion about the induction experience.

Regional staff reported that evaluation of feedback had shown increased satisfaction compared with the previous process. We heard positive comments from staff in the region about the process, as below.

"I was able to spend a lot of time shadowing during my first few weeks. Then training was delivered at a pace I needed. Where needed it was adapted to my personal circumstances. It felt genuinely engaging and [I] had regular check-ins with my manager and the learning and development team."

"It was a really good experience. I met lots of people from different parts of the organisation and was able to observe a range of aspects of probation practice which helped me understand how my role fitted in."

The example above demonstrated a process which fostered a sense of belonging among new starters and provided a solid understanding of probation work as a basis to start training.

Example of effectiveness: PQiP learner induction, South West

In the South West probation region, we observed part of the induction package for staff recruited into the PQiP programme. Two specific training events, '**a day in the life of a probation office**' and '**the CJS journey**', were developed to enable staff to become familiar with the Probation Service, its organisation, work, and roles within their first few weeks. The packages included video clips from probation staff across the organisation, and those with lived experience of probation.

The region spent time ensuring that the induction process was region-specific, engaging, and providing PQiP learners with a significant amount of relevant information in an interactive way.



You can find our further information by contacting Chris.Bath@justice.gov.uk

Training

"Probation workers require knowledge about human behaviour and the wider social context of offending and about the law and policy which probation implements. Because probation aspires to be evidence-led, staff also need to be able to appraise evidence and interpret critically the inferences that are drawn from research."

(Canton and Dominey, 2018 p.278)

The success of the Probation Service relies on recruiting and retaining practitioners who possess strong supervision skills or have the potential to develop them. Research has consistently demonstrated that a positive working alliance between the practitioner and the client significantly improves outcomes for individuals under supervision and benefits society (Trotter, 2012; Bonta *et al.*, 2008). Alongside their ability to assess and manage the risk that people on probation pose, practitioners must be trained to hone relationship-building skills. Effective practice hinges on practitioners' ability to motivate service users toward change and support them in building positive structures in their lives. The evidence base for probation work has continued to expand, offering deeper insights into effective methods for working with individuals in the CJS. Successful practitioners are committed to staying informed by engaging with research, pursuing training, and participating in continuous professional development.

During our fieldwork and surveys, we heard from practitioners about what makes training effective. The most identified themes were:

Culture, time, and capacity: Practitioners highlighted the importance of adequate support to fully benefit from training. This included coverage for daily tasks and protection from issues that may arise during training sessions. In some offices, protected learning days have become part of the culture, allowing practitioners to focus solely on learning. Without this support, practitioners struggled to fully engage, which undermined their learning experiences.

Managerial motivation also played a crucial role. When managers valued training and showed interest in what practitioners gained from it, a positive learning culture was fostered. Conversely, when training was not promoted as valuable, it was perceived merely as a task to be completed, with little expectation of any real benefit.

Additionally, having a private space for online training or e-learning, away from the usual desks, was important for quality engagement. Practitioners felt that these private spaces minimised distractions and enhanced their overall learning experience.

Clear learning outcomes: Practitioners reported that they were sometimes directed to attend training without a clear understanding of its objectives or what they were expected to take away from it. This lack of clarity left them feeling uncertain about whether they had benefited from the training and how to integrate the new knowledge into their practice.

Delivery method suited to the topic: Staff felt that different delivery methods were suited to different topics. Most appreciated the convenience of not having to travel for training, noting the time and cost savings. For many learning events, online delivery worked well, especially with the development of interactive technologies like live polls, quizzes, and



breakout rooms. However, when the goal was to develop face-to-face skills with people on probation, online delivery was rarely seen as effective.

Practitioners emphasised the importance of a safe environment for engaging in skills practice, which typically required being in a room with colleagues and a trusted facilitator. The practice conditions needed to closely replicate real-life situations. Another crucial aspect of skills practice was receiving specific feedback that highlighted successes and initiated reflective conversations about areas for improvement. While practitioners often felt awkward practising skills, most agreed that the benefits outweighed the discomfort.

Reflection and follow up: A crucial part of the learning process involved follow-up discussions with managers or practice tutor assessors (PTAs) to explore what had been learned and how it was applied in practice. Ideally, practice observations provided opportunities to integrate learning into casework and develop skills for building relationships with people on probation. Receiving specific feedback on practice, which highlighted the impact of good practice, helped practitioners gain confidence and understand how their approach could influence the success of a supervision session.

Monitoring mandatory learning



The HMPPS intranet learning platform specifies the mandatory, required, and desirable learning for all staff based on their role. This includes national and local training, seven-minute briefings, videos, reports, and guidance for self-directed learning. The learning can be accessed by following this link: [Learning based on roles \(sharepoint.com\)](#)



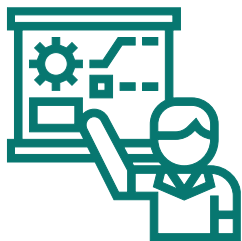
Example of effectiveness: Mandatory training completions, East Midlands

During our inspection, we found that the East Midlands region consistently achieved the highest completion rates for mandatory training across England and Wales. This success was attributed to its effective use of the learning and development dashboard data, which was reviewed monthly to update heads of function on completion statuses. These updates were discussed at PDU accountability meetings and shared with senior leadership teams for regional oversight. Regular promotion of learning, and development updates at middle managers' meetings and on the local intranet, along with proactive engagement from heads of function, supported this culture.

For classroom events which focused on safeguarding children, the regional learning and development team managed bookings, monitored attendance, and updated heads of function on any failures to attend. By using dashboard data to identify non-completions and directly emailing staff with event details, they ensured targeted follow up. Quarterly reports on completions and failures to attend helped heads of function manage and address training needs effectively.

This approach demonstrated a strong regional commitment to managing data and taking action to maintain high training completion rates.

Learning and delivery methods



In January 2024, the HMPPS evidence-based practice team released *Training for Probation Practitioners: What Works?*. This comprehensive review highlighted the most effective methods for delivering probation practitioner training. The review considered the wide-ranging methods available to deliver learning and development, including e-learning, online facilitated learning, and face-to-face methods. The findings suggested that while remote methods were suitable in many instances, face-to-face learning was particularly beneficial for reflective practice activities, especially when participants were unfamiliar with each other or the tutor. This approach acknowledged the importance of building trust and creating a safe environment for practising skills and engaging in meaningful reflection. In response to our findings from various inspections that even though practitioners attended training this did not always equate to high-quality casework, many regions had introduced additional learning and support activities to improve learning transfer.

Some regions had implemented new ways of supporting learning, recognising that e-learning did not support the learning style of all staff.

Example of effectiveness: Action-learning journals, East Midlands

The East Midlands region implemented a new learning approach that replaced traditional briefings with action-learning journals. The journals covered key areas, such as domestic abuse, safeguarding, spousal assault risk assessment (SARA), stalking, risk assessment, risk management planning, sentence planning, motivational techniques, and professional curiosity.

The journals were designed to be facilitated by a senior probation officer (SPO) in team settings during protected learning time. They aimed to develop individual thinking, and share practice and peer learning which could be applied to casework. Each one-hour session included an action plan for discussion.

This method aimed to supplement e-learning by applying existing knowledge to real-world case management. It allowed SPOs to develop their team's practice, understand their strengths, and identify areas needing support.

The region reported initial positive feedback, with teams gaining confidence in navigating national policies and SPOs developing a greater understanding of their staff. Because of the promising results, additional journals on topics such as sentence planning were developed to support ongoing professional learning and reflection.



East Midlands region has shared an example of its [action learning journal on domestic abuse](#) and [the SPO answer booklet](#).

Example of effectiveness: Mock oral hearings, East Midlands

In early 2024, a strategy was implemented in Nottingham to tackle the problem of trainees qualifying without experiencing an oral parole hearing, often due to cancellations or lack of observation opportunities. To bridge this gap, a PQiP SPO with a background in court work

approached her networks to enlist a voluntary retired solicitor and parole board member. Together, they recreated an oral hearing to provide essential experience for the trainees.

Participants were invited to engage in a realistic scenario, led by the retired parole board member. The sessions were set up as a formal oral hearing, with an expectation that attendees dressed and behaved as though it were a real-life situation. The PQiP SPOs, POs, and other staff played various roles to provide a complete experience.

The 3.5-hour session included pauses to explain the reasoning behind certain questions from the parole board chair and explanation of processes, fostering an interactive learning environment.

The event was well received, with high demand limiting attendance to 35 people. The region has intended to deliver further events and make this an annual event for trainees and newly qualified officers (NQOs).

During our inspection an NQO described the event as *"one of the best pieces of training I've done."*

The event's success was due to the ability to see important skills in action, learn directly from experts, and use a safe environment in which to demystify what can be a daunting process.

Example of effectiveness: Face-to-face SARA training, East of England

HMPPS SARA training, previously a two-day, in-person training event, has moved to e-learning with PQiP learners required to complete this independently. Suffolk PDU adopted an approach in which the SARA training was completed face to face in small groups. Facilitated by an SPO, learners were instructed to bring their laptops and the e-learning was set up on a main screen.

The face-to-face session was structured to allow time to work through the e-learning, and then talk through each section as a group, providing opportunities for query and reflection, which the SPO supported.

The final section of the SARA e-learning was a case study, which the group completed together. Learners talked through professional judgement and how they would answer each section.

This approach was effective and received positive feedback from learners, who found the in-person, collaborative learning beneficial to share ideas and views with their colleagues. It also elevated the status of SARA and confirmed it as a crucial assessment.

The SPO commented: *"It ensures that the importance of SARA as an assessment tool is not lost. Feedback from learners has been that they appreciate having the time protected for the learning with no interruptions, and that completing it as a group means that they do not get distracted with other tasks whilst completing the training."*

During our focus group, probation practitioners said they valued the approach; one said:

"The SPO goes through e-learning, pauses, and holds discussions, allowing time to reflect. I gained far more from this than I would if I had completed the training alone."

Example of effectiveness: OASys learner support training, Kent, Surrey, and Sussex

In the Kent, Surrey, and Sussex region, the learning and development team delivered risk training sessions to PQiP learners, focusing on how to assess risk using the OASys (offender assessment system) tool. The training was split into two full-day, face-to-face events.

Day one focused on developing knowledge, understanding, and the skills necessary for effective use of the OASys assessment tool. The training included an introduction to OASys, discussions on the required knowledge and skills, and exercises to practise professional curiosity and information-gathering. Participants engaged in case study analyses and skills practice sessions to enhance their interviewing techniques. The day emphasised reflective practice, understanding biases, and the importance of comprehensive information review. The training aimed to build a solid foundation for producing high-quality OASys assessments, crucial for public protection and effective sentence delivery.

Day two focused on enhancing skills in critical analysis, challenging conversations, and risk assessment. The day began with reflections on day one, followed by exercises in professional curiosity and critical analysis. Participants engaged in skills practice through interviews, focusing on understanding motivations and triggers for offending behaviours. The afternoon was dedicated to completing a full risk of serious harm (ROSH) summary, with exercises designed to model best practice in writing and assessment. The training emphasised the importance of thorough analysis and effective communication in managing risk and improving probation outcomes.

To date, there have not been deep dives into analysis of the success of these events. However, participants completed an evaluation form, and the qualitative data indicated that learners found the events useful. During our focus group we heard from practitioners who had attended the training, with one commenting:

"My initial sentence plans (ISPs) have come on leaps and bounds since I've done it; it is very rare I've had an ISP come back since I've done it."

Example of effectiveness: Risk assessment workshops, North East

In the North East, a full-day, face-to-face risk assessment and planning workshop was delivered to all front-facing probation practitioners within the region (a total of 38 sessions), including heads of function and members of the regional leadership team. The interactive workshop focused on professional curiosity exercises, as well as a real-life North East case study looking at risk assessment, risk management, and contingency planning. It allowed probation practitioners to reflect upon their own practice, as well as upskilling them in HMIP terminology to determine what 'sufficiency' looks like.

The regional effective practice lead was involved in delivery of all sessions, and each PDU provided a single point of contact as a co-facilitator. This ensured that the PDU and region gave a consistent message. There was a strong emphasis on probation practitioners sharing experiences of casework and having proactive discussion with one another to find solutions.

Post-workshop questionnaire feedback was positive, as detailed in the graph below.



There is now a rolling delivery of PQiP and PSO risk and assessment workshops, and court teams also deliver their own variation; there are plans to develop prison staff-specific packages.

This example demonstrated the value placed on face-to-face training to address targeted areas of practice, provide focused discussion and reflection time, and improve practitioner confidence and quality in their work.

Example of effectiveness: PDU quality development officer (QDO) support, Yorkshire and the Humber

Feedback from staff in the Yorkshire and the Humber region was that PDUs would value more QDO visibility in offices, and this was incorporated into the quality improvement plan for 2024/2025 (commenced in April 2024). The plan outlined that QDOs would have an 'office presence day' once a month in their linked PDU. The QDOs, in collaboration with the head of service, established how best to use their time during these days. Each PDU had its own plan, which included briefings, professional development days, one-to-one work, audits, case discussions, and workshops.

Additionally, the QDOs offered a dedicated monthly assessment and planning surgery, where they met probation practitioners to discuss assessment and planning regional case audit tool (RCAT) standards to drive improvements across the RCAT scores. These one-hour surgeries were delivered either face to face or via Microsoft Teams, and they received positive verbal feedback.

The presence of the QDO provided practitioners with tailored, continuous support, and emphasised that learning and development were ongoing process.

Example of effectiveness: Neurodiversity-friendly training pilot, Greater Manchester

In Greater Manchester, a neurodiversity-friendly training pilot was launched as part of the region's commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace. Recognising a national gap in such provisions, the probation learning project manager secured approval from the regional senior management team to implement this pilot programme.

Aligned with business priorities to enhance the performance and quality of sentence management delivery, two training events were offered: performance and quality training, and professional curiosity. Four events took place specifically targeting staff who identified as neurodivergent, had a diagnosis or would benefit from a more relaxed training environment.

Adaptations were informed by interviews with neurodivergent colleagues and guidance from a local charity. Changes included smaller groups, use of silent fidgets, advance reading materials, printed materials on the day, hourly breaks, brain breaks, lengthened reading time, adapted slides, and shorter training days. These adjustments ensured that the same information was conveyed as in the original events.

Participants who attended the events noted the following:

"A more relaxed atmosphere; it felt like an inclusive and safe space, there was a slower pace and more friendly tone."

"Smaller group helped massively."

"Safe, calm, and non-judgemental space."

Participants completed learning logs, which indicated increased mindfulness about performance and quality interactions, and greater awareness of service level measures. Trainers noted that the small cohort of highly engaged staff benefited from the adapted delivery style.

The event evaluation data received an average scoring of eight out of 10; 67 per cent of delegates felt the event entirely met its aims, and 33 per cent said it partially met its aims. All participants noted that they found the event useful and the trainer engaging.

Formal evaluation of the pilot in December 2024 indicated some positive trends within the RCAT data on risk assessment and partnership working improvements, with a recommendation to make comparative analysis of RCAT following future training events to continue to measure the impact.

This pilot demonstrated the effectiveness of tailored training environments in supporting neurodivergent staff and enhancing their learning experience. The region specifically noted its value through its own evaluation and noted that: *"at no additional cost, training can be made more accessible and inclusive to neurodivergent colleagues."*



[You can read the strategy paper which was presented to Greater Manchester senior management team here.](#)



[Here you can access the training advert for staff.](#)



[Greater Manchester region also shared its P&Q workshop – Neurodiversity-friendly training slides.](#)

Embedding learning into practice



Learning should not stop at training, but seamlessly transition into practical application. This includes robust follow up and reflection mechanisms to ensure that new-found knowledge is embedded into practice effectively.

Goldstein & Ford (2002) noted in their research that learning transfer was about using the knowledge and skills gained through training and learning and development in the workplace in a way that led to *"sustained and meaningful improvements in practice."*

In terms of practitioners' ability to transfer learning into their practice, studies have identified that the following are important.

- **The design and delivery of the training** – clear objectives, relevant content to the role. Training for mixed groups of staff to develop cohesion and share knowledge and understanding, using a variety of learning strategies (case studies, role plays, discussions).
- **The content of the training** – focus on improving knowledge and understanding, skills development, spanning multiple sessions, face to face rather than virtual.
- **Ongoing supervision** – avoiding knowledge being lost through quality supervision, applying the skills to the role immediately, feedback, and coaching.

Many studies have looked at the transfer of training into practice. Here are some examples.



[How to prompt training effectiveness? An investigation on achievement goal setting intervention in workplace learning](#)



[Transfer of training: The known and the unknown](#)



[Evaluating training for new government officials: a case study using the success case method](#)



[HMPPS Intranet – Probation Learning Helping Training Stick – Evidence Based Tips for Managers poster.pdf](#) is a helpful poster for managers to support their teams in transferring their knowledge and skills into practice following learning and development events. **Please note you will require a Ministry of Justice (MOJ) log-in to access this document.**

Example of effectiveness: Learning development log pilot, Greater Manchester

Greater Manchester region piloted learning development logs to track training attendance and the application of learning in the workplace. The log was a tool for auditing and evaluating the impact of learning and development activities. It identified areas where training has not been implemented effectively, allowing for additional support, such as one-on-one sessions with a QDO. The log encouraged staff to reflect on their strengths, areas for improvement, and how to enhance their practice post-training. For staff with performance improvement plans, the log helped monitor the application of key learning points, and could prevent formal performance management by addressing deficiencies early and providing necessary support.

The pilot was launched in July 2024, with a video to communicate the change in expectation. This video was played at the beginning of every regional training event to support its implementation.

Completed learning development logs were used as live examples. The next phase of the pilot was to contact line managers to ascertain whether the learning development logs were being discussed in supervision with practitioners, and the impact of this on practice improvements.



Here Greater Manchester region has shared its [Training event Development Logs video Presentation June 2024.pptx](#).



[Here is an example of the Greater Manchester learning development log.](#)

Protected development time

During our inspection, in most regions we heard about professional development days which aimed to provide staff with the opportunity to complete training, reflect on their work, and embed learning from development events. Some arrangements were more effective than others in achieving their aims; the most effective were those where leaders were driving clear messages about the importance of this activity, and ensuring the days were embedded into the team culture. For many teams, these days were not negotiable, and mandated to ensure practitioners and managers had this protected time.

Somerset had monthly themed office shutdown days across the PDU. Practitioners told us they made time to attend these events and found the themes useful in supporting their learning and development; for example, a breach workshop had increased knowledge and understanding of the enforcement processes.

In Southampton we were told that: *“protected development days are in person. People weren't keen at first but [we] had some good sessions, e.g. one with MOSOVO [management of sexual and violent offenders] police, and one with a forensic psychologist. We have seven teams and all teams attended over two days for 1.5 hours each session.”*

In the North East region, we were told there were monthly face-to-face development days where one or more teams came together to focus on a themed topic. These sessions included examples, skill-building activities, and guest speakers, which helped refresh training and keep everyone up to date. They also provided opportunities for shared learning with other agencies. Attendance was mandatory and focused on continuous professional development: *“we get together and discuss performance and other things. We meet face to face at the same venue and spend the day together.”*

In Yorkshire and the Humber, monthly team meeting and practice development days (PDDs) incorporated training and guest speakers from other agencies. Staff found these helpful, as the time was allocated in their diaries and meetings took place in the office. We were given examples where substance misuse teams, accommodation providers, and personality disorder teams provided inputs that enabled staff to feel better informed when making referrals. *“PDDs have been a big driver in accessing training. Before [PDDs] there was something every quarter or so, more drip feeding. PDDs are concentrated time in the office. The majority of people take more away from face-to-face training.”*

Where protected development days were deemed to be effective, they had become an embedded part of the culture and were planned up to a year in advance. Staff were supported to free up time to attend the events. They particularly valued opportunities to hear from experts brought in as guest speakers, including staff from partner organisations.

Example of effectiveness: Performance and quality (P&Q) development days, North East

In the North East region, P&Q development days were held for each new intake of PQiP trainees and newly appointed PSOs. Managed by the learning and development teams, these full-day, face-to-face sessions introduced staff to the P&Q team and their role, outlined key processes, and emphasised the importance of audits and feedback. Chaired by a senior P&Q manager, the events covered roles, regional support resources, and the three-tier assurance approach, including RCAT and court case audit tools (CCAT), probation assurance and risk group (PAR), and HM Inspectorate of Probation inspections. Good practice examples and tips for using nDelius case management system/OASys were provided. The day ended with discussions on the death-under-supervision process, serious further offences (SFO), complaints, and the continuous improvement database. This information was reviewed and discussed at the region’s effective practice board to ensure relevant learning and praise were communicated to staff. Additionally, the data helped develop quality improvement strategies, such as creating a SARA quick guide for staff based on identified issues.

Positive feedback from attendees highlighted the sessions' benefits and the increased use of support systems post-training.

“This training raised my awareness of the P&Q team, features such as ‘boost’,⁶ and knowledge around SFOs.”

⁶ Boost is a tool designed to help colleagues manage their performance and data quality tasks by providing information about tasks that are pending and overdue. Using Boost regularly improves task management. Upcoming performance tasks can be scheduled in calendars to remind colleagues of due dates. Additionally, SMS text messages can be sent directly to supervised individuals via the platform. The North East is the only probation region to use Boost.

“The course allayed some trepidation around the SFO process.”

“It was great to hear about what the performance and quality team do and how their work fits in with ours.”

Practice tutor assessors (PTAs) have also commented on the impact of these sessions:

“I have noticed in my quality assurance that there seems to be less confusion in victim groups, assessment of immediacy, and follow through to the risk management plan.”

“Knowledge of `boost` is having a positive impact on people’s understanding of service expectations and delivering on timeliness.”

“The serious further offence input is taking away the anxiety around the things they hear in the office.”

The region also responded to suggestions regarding the length and content of the training. It acknowledged that staff may not need the knowledge until they encountered specific themes discussed during the training; they would, however, have established links and an understanding of the processes.

Probation service officer (PSO) support



PSOs work in a range of frontline practitioner roles. While the cases they hold are of lower risk categories than those held by POs, their work remains complex and requires high levels of skills. Longer-standing practitioners we met during our fieldwork criticised the fact that they had not had the benefit of a structured training programme when entering the role. We found that the need for a clear and robust training pathway for PSOs had been acknowledged nationally. Some regions had launched additional initiatives to equip PSOs with the necessary skills and support, as we report below.

Example of effectiveness: PSO mentor support, Yorkshire and the Humber

In the Yorkshire and the Humber region, a mentor support programme for newly recruited PSOs had been running since October 2022. The programme utilised PTA and agency resources to provide PTA mentors to PSOs, primarily new recruits. Recognising that new PSOs often did not receive PTA support and that SPOs struggled to provide the necessary time, the programme aimed to ensure that learning events translated into practical application.

Under the training programme, cases were not allocated to PSOs until they had completed foundational learning modules, ensuring that new recruits were well prepared before taking on responsibilities. Protected learning time was provided through the gateway to practice, with early-stage learning delivered via one-to-one and group sessions. Mentors delivered relevant sessions and workshops, focusing on basic competencies, and addressed individual needs and challenges. Additionally, workshops brought together new recruits within their PDU or neighbouring PDUs to share experiences, which helped them settle into their duties more effectively and progress through the vocational qualification VQ3 Level 3 Certificate in Probation Practice more efficiently.

Five workshops took place when PSOs had been in post approximately five to six months, after they had completed national training. The workshops focused on practical case examples and peer learning:

- [workshop one and two](#) – a full-day event which focused on an introduction to professional curiosity and risk assessment.
- [workshop three](#) – a virtual event which focused on CRISSA⁷ recording and took place following nDelius training
- [workshop four and five](#) – a full-day event which focused on safeguarding and domestic abuse.

The workshops were designed to ensure training translated into practice, with mentors providing one-to-one and group support. Mentors also encouraged shadowing and observation of other roles and departments to reinforce learning.

Mentors used the intelligence gained from workshops to establish where there might be gaps in knowledge, or themes that were more challenging to embed. Shorter presentations and materials were then developed to address challenging areas.

Mentor support included reflection sessions, shadowing opportunities, and dedicated feedback on practice. The programme aimed to nurture confidence and competence in PSOs, ensuring they were well prepared for their roles.

The initiative demonstrated significant benefits, with participants feeling more settled and confident in their duties. Continued evaluation and adaptation of the programme based on feedback ensured its ongoing effectiveness. The programme led to improved retention rates among PSOs and more efficient progression through the VQ3 process. Mentors nurtured the talent and development within the PSO staff group and supported their confidence in taking the next step to apply for PQiP. Where possible, the region attempted to maintain the same PTA for PQiP learners, which supported consistency.

During our focus groups PTAs commented:

“You can see the difference across those who have gone through the PSO role supported by the project. The retention of PSOs has improved and there are benefits to it. It would be so beneficial to extend funding and for it to be considered nationally.”

“I think it has been successful as it gives them a mentor to have one-step removed discussions to discuss challenges, worries, concerns, and development. People see the value in the PSO role because of it, I feel.”

Example of effectiveness: Pre-vocational qualification (VQ) support for PSOs, South Central

South Central region data analysis identified that many newly recruited PSOs left the Probation Service within their first year due to issues such as feeling unsupported, inconsistent experiences, and unclear expectations.

Following the HM Inspectorate of Probation independent reviews of [Damien Bendall](#) and [Jordan McSweeney](#) in January 2023, there were changes to the training requirements for

⁷ A standardised method for structuring and recording an interview with an individual: **check-in**, **review**, **implement**, **summarise**, **set tasks**, **set next appointment**.

new PSOs and PQiP learners before they could hold cases. A pre-VQ⁸ support model was introduced in July 2023, which provided a PTA to PSOs in courts and sentence management teams from commencement of their employment with the following plan:

- initial learning agreement meetings held within 15 days, with reviews at months three and six
- months one to three focused on required training and settling into role
- months three to six introduced practice observation and developmental feedback
- month six assessed practitioner readiness for the VQ3.⁹ The average time to be assessment-ready was seven and a half months.

This model was effective in keeping PSOs on track with their learning, with swift action taken on any attendance issues.

Attrition data for South Central region showed 16 per cent less attrition since 2021 for those with less than one-year tenure as a PSO. Of the 86 PSOs who had accessed this support model since July 2023, 20 were no longer in a PSO role – eight had resigned either due to the impact of the role on self or family or that the role was not as expected. All other PSOs had moved on to PQiP or other roles in the Probation Service or wider civil service.

"This has had a positive impact on retention. I'm working with a PSO who previously joined [the Probation Service] and left and has now rejoined. It has been positive to hear how she has found the experience a second time round, having left due to lack of support originally, and how supported she feels this time. It feels like it is having a positive impact."

Example of effectiveness: Vocational qualification (VQ3) for PSOs, national

PSOs are expected to undertake the VQ3 within their first 12 months of practice. Although resource challenges meant that this opportunity was not always provided, we found positive examples of how the chance to complete this qualification had supported practitioners to consolidate their learning and gain confidence in their practice. The VQ3 was well received when it had come at the right time for the practitioner, usually towards the end of their first 12 months in practice; we found it was valued less when completed by practitioners who had been in post for longer.

"The VQ3 gave me feedback and confidence and reassured me. Through completing it I found out I was doing a good job; before that I wasn't sure."

Practitioners who valued the VQ3 process found observations and support from their PTA had helped them to reflect on and improve their practice. For some, it had given them confidence to apply for the PQiP programme. For some PSOs, observations as part of the VQ3 were the only time they had been given direct feedback on their face-to-face practice with people on probation. The observations provided an opportunity to consider their skills and use tools, such as motivational interviewing, in practice.

⁸ Vocational qualifications are often career-based and typically involve a mix of studying and hands-on practical work experience. A vocational qualification does not always require an examination, or can involve a mix of exams through the year and some coursework.

⁹ VQ3 – vocational qualification Level 3 is equivalent to one or more A levels.

Example of effectiveness: PSO development programme, Greater Manchester

The Greater Manchester local PSO development programme was implemented in November 2021, when it was established to complement the gateway to practice, nDelius and OASys training, and the national PSO modules.

The initial iteration was delivered by managers and practitioners in Manchester North PDU, largely via MS Teams due to Covid-19 restrictions. By 2023, the programme had been handed over to the learning development team; a dedicated PSO development programme facilitator was recruited and worked closely with quality development officers to refine the content, improve its delivery, and establish what has become an innovative, interactive, and dynamic learning programme.

All programme sessions were delivered in person except for performance and partnerships, which were delivered via Teams. The current programme consisted of the following sessions:

1. Performance
2. Risk of serious harm (ROSH) and risk management plans ('four pillars')
3. Domestic abuse
4. What to do with a new case
5. Equality, diversity, inclusion and belonging (EDIB)
6. Partnerships (Andrew Scott)
7. Victim contact scheme
8. Restorative justice (RJ)
9. Challenging behaviour
10. Interventions.

Through investment in this training, the region expected that all PSOs could meet the demands of their role and deliver a quality service. The programme was further extended as a mandatory requirement to all PSOs in Greater Manchester regardless of length of time in post.

Evaluation of the programme found that over 90 per cent of staff thought the events were useful. The region reviewed 33 RCATs and found that available comparative data showed that learning had been applied following training, and contributed to performance and quality improvements. Ongoing evaluation and review has continued, as recommended in the evaluation, to ensure the training package remained relevant, useful, and had a positive impact on practice for attendees.



[You can view the regional communications team launching the mandatory PSO development programme here.](#)



[In this interactive presentation, you can hear from Kathryn Moynihan, probation learning project manager, who details the PSO development programme.](#)



You can listen to the feedback from a PSO who had completed the PSO development programme by following [this link to the Greater Manchester Probation Service learning and development newsletter](#).

Initiatives to support PQiP learners

The PQiP programme was fast paced and intensive, particularly for those undertaking the shorter pathways and completing their training within 15 months. The volume of learners going through the training meant that resources to support them had been stretched, particularly in areas with the biggest staffing shortfalls. Considering the staffing challenges, some regions had diversified aspects of how they delivered the PQiP programme within the resources they had, while still providing the necessary support and development.

Example of effectiveness: The Academy, London

The Academy was introduced in the London region in response to feedback from PQiP learners during the previous 21-month PQiP training programmes. Feedback indicated that after completing six months of training, and in the period when they were not attending university, learners were faced with a lack of experienced staff in the office to shadow and gain support from, and they felt they were left to their own devices. To address this, a three-month placement in a prison, followed by a three-month placement in a court, was implemented.

This initiative started in late 2022 and aimed to prepare a significant number of learners to commence in post in London amid staff shortages. The programme progressed through various iterations following feedback from learners; additional workshops were integrated into standard delivery of the PQiP programme, and placements were shortened to 10 weeks each in prison and court.

The Academy is currently under evaluation to determine its effectiveness for learners. Despite initial concerns that learners were stepping out of sentence management and their comfort zones, anecdotal evidence indicated that they had had a positive experience, even when working in different departments across the organisation. Learner feedback was as follows:

Placements:

"The court and prison placements gave me a much broader understanding of how the probation service works."

"I really enjoyed the placements because we're making connections that we can use in the future."

"I loved my prison placement; the managers really went out of their way to help us develop and the staff were really helpful."

PQiP pathway:

"I think the programme is great; between the placements, and university, and the PTAs, you leave the programme having received guidance from a lot of smart people."

"It's a good mix between practical learning and theory; there's a lot to learn. If anything, I think it should probably be longer."

Example of effectiveness: PQiP learners in custody, East Midlands

The increase in recruitment of trainee probation officers meant there were challenges in providing a range of opportunities for learners on the PQiP programme. In some sentence management teams, and through the implementation of the offender management in custody (OMiC) model, opportunities were created for PQiP learners on the programme to meet the requirements of their qualification in a custodial setting.

We met a regional prison PQiP SPO and probation learning leads to discuss the ongoing programme for training PQiP learners in custody and the journey this had taken.

An initial pilot of PQiP training in custody in the Midlands had faced some challenges, leading to no successful completions. However, following review and a decision to split the programme between East and West Midlands, adjustments were made to integrate training within prisons.

Key improvements included:

- the appointment of a prison PQiP SPO to line manage the learners and provide ongoing support and developmental guidance
- securing the support of prison governors
- ensuring that PQiP candidates accepted their placements in prisons following an offer of employment
- programme mapping of vocational qualification requirements to prison work.

This approach aimed to provide a stable training environment and encourage trainees to remain in prison roles post-qualification.

Learners progressed through the qualification via three routes, as shown in the diagram below.

15-month programme	Progression (PSOP)	21-month programme
Month 0-6	Month 0-6	Month 0-6
Commence VQ assessment, some learners may have one academic knowledge to complete, commence training programme.	Commence VQ assessment, some learners may have 1-5 academic knowledge to complete, commence training programme. Case allocation, prison POM type work: working at 20 – 40 per cent of full-time, standard caseload depending on academic requirement.	Commence the level five academic element, some learners may have 2-4 academic knowledge to complete, commence the training programme. Case allocation, prison POM type work; working at 20 per cent of a full-time standard caseload.
Month 7-12	Month 7-12	Month 7-18
Continue with VQ assessment, commence level 6 academic programme, continue with probation officer training. Caseload to include probation officer tasks and co-working, working at 40 per cent of a full-time standard caseload.	Continue with VQ assessment, commence the level 6 academic programme, continue with probation officer training. Caseload to include probation officer tasks and co-working: working at 40 per cent of a full-time standard caseload.	Commence VQ assessment, commence the level 6 academic programme in month 12, continue with probation officer training. Caseload to include probation officer tasks and co-working: working at 40 per cent of a full-time standard caseload.
Month 13-15	Month 13-15	Month 19-21
Completion of VQ and academic elements by month 15, completion of all training required. Caseload to include co-working and autonomy of practice to be demonstrated: working at 60 per cent of a full-time standard caseload.	Completion of VQ elements by month 15, completion of all training required. Caseload to include co-working and autonomy of practice to be demonstrated: working at 60 per cent of a full-time standard caseload.	Completion of VQ and academic elements by month 21, completion of all training required. Caseload to include co-working and autonomy of practice to be demonstrated: working at 60 per cent of a full-time standard caseload.

Figure 1: Progression routes for prison PQiP learners¹⁰

¹⁰ Adapted from East Midlands Probation Service guidance for governors.

Feedback from prison governors, staff, and learners was positive, indicating that the training environments in prisons were supportive and conducive to learning. Despite some challenges, such as managing placement preferences and performance management, the programme showed promising results, with several trainees due to qualify. Continuous evaluation and adaptation of the training materials were crucial in addressing gaps and ensuring the programme's success.

This was an effective example of broadening the opportunities available to learners to gain experience in other departments and roles within the Probation Service.



Access these links to read more about the PQiP learners in prison offender management unit [guidance for governors](#) and [pilot review](#).



If a newly qualified officer (NQO) makes the transition from working in a prison to working in the community following completion of their qualification, they are also supported via a [Transition outline plan from PQiP Prison Placement to Community NQO Placement](#).

Supporting newly qualified officers



The national framework for newly qualified officers (NQOs) aims to provide a consistent and supportive approach for the transition and development of NQOs in the Probation Service. It outlines expectations and enablers for regions to ensure NQOs receive structured support, learning, and development during their first 12 months post-qualification. The framework emphasises a balance between national consistency and regional flexibility, ensuring that NQOs are supported effectively in managing their caseloads and developing their professional skills. Key components include structured handovers, tailored learning and development sessions, and regular supervision to ensure NQOs achieve the necessary competence and confidence in their roles.



[You can access the national framework for newly qualified officers here.](#)

In some areas, there have been efforts to offer additional support to NQOs during the initial months after qualification. This recognises that trainees are not fully developed by the end of their training period and require ongoing support post-qualification. The cases below illustrate regional examples where enhanced support was offered.

Example of effectiveness: Post-qualification NQO support, West Midlands

In the West Midlands region, PTAs remained involved with NQOs for six months post-qualification. This approach stemmed from the work completed by the national probation learning leads and managers, which surveyed NQOs about the support they would want post-qualification. This identified a key theme of structured support on topics, although some of these topics had come up in the standard feedback from NQOs about their qualification.

"We're doing a lot to fill the gaps in training ... we've developed this with our managers. [It's] Better for NQOs in recognition of gaps. We are now going to be more actively involved over the next six months [following their qualification] and they [NQOs] will still have PTA support."

The West Midlands NQO regional guidance document outlined the support and development framework for NQOs, aligning with the national framework, but also including from July 2024 additional measures of extending PTA support for six months post-qualification:

- PTAs provided ongoing support, including monthly check-ins, developmental observations, and participation in handover and transition meetings
- A pilot programme for coaching and mentoring by PTAs was also introduced.

This guidance aimed to ensure that NQOs in the West Midlands received consistent, structured support to develop their skills and manage their caseloads effectively.

Formal feedback from NQOs was due to be sought in early 2025 following completion of the first six-months cohort. Early views expressed during our inspection focus groups included:

"I'm the first cohort where we are keeping our PTA for the first six months of the NQO year. My PTA has the knowledge of my learning journey so far, which my manager does not, which helps with the transition into the new role, and means I have someone supporting me who understands my learning style. I have joint meetings with my PTA and SPO to talk about progress, which is really helpful."



[You can view the West Midlands NQO regional guidance here.](#)

Example of effectiveness: Enhanced NQO offer, Wales

Wales Probation Service developed and implemented an enhanced NQO offer which supplemented the national NQO framework for cohorts who qualified from July 2024.

The enhanced offer included:

- **Ongoing PTA support throughout the NQO period** for case discussions with conversations about professional practice and signposting to relevant sources of information to support professional development.
- **Introduction of a three-way, mid-way review and final review meeting.** The NQO, SPO and PTA meet to review strengths, learning, attendance at workshops and continuous professional development (CPD), share feedback, and evaluate practice post-qualification.
- **Three peer-led communities of practice**, which are group reflective discussions facilitated by PTAs or an experienced practitioner with a PO qualification, drawing themes from Wales quality assurance findings.
- **One observation and reflective practice discussion** during the NQO period to support ongoing learning and development, and application of skills.

The results of these actions were due to be monitored through learning and development links to Wales Probation Service and governance. This was a positive initiative in response to HM Inspectorate of Probation recommendations from core inspections, which identified that continued support and development was required for NQOs to ensure that quality and confidence of practitioners improved (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024 p.6).

Example of effectiveness: Peer-led communities for NQOs, North East

Following feedback from previous PQiP cohorts, the learning and development team in the North East region recognised that NQOs needed more support following qualification to support their transition into the PO role. In response, the region developed a framework of support for NQOs which aligned with the national framework and included some additions, such as mentoring and extended PTA support into the NQO period.

For those qualifying from cohorts since June 2024, PTAs have facilitated peer-led communities, providing supportive opportunities through action-learning sets in the PDUs, where NQOs can discuss cases, difficulties, and good practice. These were monthly sessions for the first three months post-qualification, after which an individual plan was agreed for the remaining six months. While this was a new initiative, it is another example which aligned well with our findings that the NQO period is crucial to longer term career development and retention, and that NQOs require additional support to build confidence and competence and successfully make the transition to the probation officer role.

An NQO from the July 2024 cohort commented:

"I just wanted to provide some positive feedback on the NQO sessions ... my PTA has met with me twice and she has structured the sessions to discuss the high-risk cases that I have. I've found this really beneficial, and it helped me to clear my head a bit with all the madness of being an NQO!! ... It's confirmed to me that some of the things that I've been doing are correct, but it has also been productive to have a different set of eyes on the case for anything that I have missed."



[Here you can view the North East probation region newly qualified officer framework, which outlines the additional support offered to practitioners in the post-qualification period.](#)



Reflection questions

For learning and development teams and managers:

- How well are training and development followed up with practitioners to ensure learning is embedded?
- What opportunities exist for practitioners to practise skills and receive developmental feedback which further improves their practice?
- Do learning and development events suit the needs of all learners? Are there ways that they could be improved to be more accessible for all attendees?

Key take-aways:

Effective learning and development should:



be an intrinsic part of working life, with support in place to allow training to be prioritised and undertaken in appropriate environments



be clear, with structured training pathways that are well supported by PTAs and managers to ensure learning is absorbed and embedded into practice



utilise a diverse array of training methods to maintain learner interest and engagement. Ensure that the delivery methods are appropriate for the subject matter. For skills development training, provide ample opportunities for learners to practise their skills and receive constructive feedback to facilitate continuous improvement.

Retention

"Public services depend on happy, stable workforces to keep the public safe, healthy, and well educated. But public sector workforces face problems, from loss of experienced staff to high turnover and vacancies."

Prompted by staffing problems across public services, the Institute for Government (2023) explored recent workforce trends, the causes and impact of poor retention rates, and offered recommendations for overcoming these.

While this report did not include the Probation Service, the staffing trends and much of the learning can be applied. The overarching findings of why staff leave aligned with the findings from our thematic inspection and included the following.



- **Pay in public services had become less competitive.** Salaries had not kept pace with private sector wages since 2010 and had also fallen in real terms.
- **Workloads were high.** Workloads had always been high but had become worse, and large numbers of staff cited excessive workloads as the key reason for wanting to leave their job.
- **Leadership and management could be poor.** Many staff reported that there was insufficient management capacity to support them properly.
- **Societal norms had changed.** Flexible working arrangements had become increasingly popular but tended to be less widespread in public service roles, putting the sector at a comparative disadvantage.
- **Goodwill was dissipating.** Morale was low and many staff felt undervalued, citing post-2010 pay decisions, the stresses of the pandemic, and the sense that there was no help on the horizon.

A summary of the recommendations made in the report are as follows.

- **Workforce planning:** each public service should have a workforce strategy with independently audited staffing forecasts for five, 10, and 20 years, detailing expected numbers of leavers and joiners annually.
- **Pay:** the government should use pay review bodies to balance affordability with recruitment and retention impacts, considering premium payments for specialist skills or regional shortages.
- **Workloads:** the government should regularly assess the impact of policy decisions on staff workloads.
- **Leadership and management:** address barriers to effective leadership, such as hierarchical structures, short-termism, perverse incentives, and resistance to diverse backgrounds and approaches.
- **Flexible working:** monitor compliance with flexible working initiatives and support local leaders where needed.
- **Evidence base:** understand the costs of poor retention in public services.

Many of these recommendations required attention at a senior strategic level. In our main report we called for improvements to workforce planning arrangements and consideration of probation pay. However, during our fieldwork we saw some positive examples of approaches at regional or local level which aligned with these recommendations, for example linked to flexible working – in some offices in South Central region, staff had been invited to request a four-day working week to support work-life balance if they felt that would be beneficial for them.

The MoJ has developed a retention toolkit¹¹ which can be used with the aim of reducing attrition rates and improving employee engagement. The kit outlines the top 10 drivers of attrition and suggests activities that managers, leaders, and HR (human resources) staff can consider to support retention at local, regional, and national levels.

In addition, HMPPS has retention research teams who can conduct in-house research to identify 'quick wins' and areas for improvement in staff retention. The teams have produced confidential reports for prison governors and probation heads of function aiming to provide structured support and insights. Support can also be offered to leaders on how to communicate findings to staff effectively.

The retention research, launched in prisons in August 2022 and in probation in April 2023, had to date involved 27 deep dives in prisons (24 with high attrition and three with low attrition) and seven probation PDUs (six with high attrition and one with low attrition). Findings from the research have been incorporated into the retention toolkit, which was refreshed and updated. The findings have been presented to senior leaders, highlighting themes and trends that could inform national policy and communications. There was also feedback to the senior HR business partner team and the retention delivery committee to consider interventions, with input from trade unions.

Professional registration

General benefits of professional registration

Professional registration was introduced on 30 September 2024 for all Probation Service roles requiring a probation qualification. It aims to acknowledge the unique role of probation practitioners in the CJS, and to recognise their competence and commitment to the highest professional standards that define the Probation Service.

Research into professionalisation of the Probation Service identified that a move towards a professional registration would forge a common identity among staff and bring the service in line with other certified professions.

"A renewed focus on 'professionalism' is rooted in a recognition of the need to re-professionalise staff through knowledge, education, and training, and to engage them in an evidence-base." (Tidmarsh, 2022).



Dr Matt Tidmarsh (2022) reviewed the literature on professionalism and applied it to the Probation Service. You can read his *Academic Insights* here: ['Professionalism in Probation'](#). (Scroll down for 2022)



Follow this next link to watch a video with commentary from chief executive officer Amy Rees and Sonia Flynn CBE (deputy director, probation operations directorate) providing an overview of the professional register, the process, and the professional standards which underpin our work: [Probation professional register: why it is important for staff](#).

¹¹ This is an internal MOJ document.



The [professional registration policy framework](#) outlines the requirements and procedures for ensuring that probation-qualified staff employed or contracted by the Probation Service maintain their professional registration.

Positive organisational culture

Human factors

The human factors strand of the learning organisation approach¹² has been discussed in previous thematic inspections as a positive approach to promote team cohesion, proactive risk management, professional curiosity, and a positive working culture.

This approach acknowledges that mistakes are inevitable and emphasises learning from them to reduce future harm. High reliability is achieved by changing the approach to error reporting, accepting mistakes, and encouraging their reporting to foster learning. Understanding successes is equally important to capture the true picture of work.

Led by the probation operations directorate (POD), in collaboration with the improvement support group (ISG), the approach as applied to the Probation Service identified key factors for effective probation delivery. These included developing a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities, being aware of unconscious biases in decision-making, overcoming communication barriers, learning from errors to improve the system and risk management, enhancing communication and outcomes through better processes, and promoting psychological safety to overcome thinking errors¹³ and develop error wisdom.¹⁴



You can read more about the human factors model in sentence management teams in Wales in the [Effective Practice - Developing operational structures and the senior probation officer role](#) insights guide.



In the [Effective Practice Guide: Unpaid Work](#) we highlight how the human factors model was adapted to ensure the approach could meet the operational complexities of unpaid work teams, and how the approach had strengthened relationships and demonstrated investment in staff.

In 2022, the Probation Service in Wales adopted a learning organisation approach to transform its operational culture and enhance service delivery. This initiative involved significant investment from the management group and extensive staff engagement. Following a phased roll-out of the human factors model, sentence management teams and wider departments were now fully operational and reporting the benefits of this approach.

¹² Learning organisation approach: *“an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights.”* (Garvin, 1993)

¹³ Examples of thinking errors include: search satisfaction. - stopping the search after finding the first plausible answer; feedback bias - making decisions based on available information without considering missing or changeable data.

¹⁴ Error wisdom: *“The ability to foresee and avert harms arising from errors. This skill is developed in a number of ways, through training, experience, adherence to well-designed procedures, and by critical analysis of one’s own and other failures.”* (Grieg, 2016)

Example of effectiveness: Learning organisation approach, South Central

During this thematic inspection, South Central teams discussed the implementation of human factors within their region, which was still in the early stages of the roll-out, with five business units and the regional leadership team putting into operation the new tools and ways of working.

The learning organisation approach aimed to support a positive shift towards a more inclusive, open learning culture and improve safety, whilst addressing strategic risks relating to practice, recruitment, retention, and wellbeing. Psychological safety was a key component of cultural change and fundamental to operationalising human factors. To enable this, the project team incrementally supported the region to undertake psychological safety baselining, to identify areas for development and consider how these could be addressed. Over time, this was due to provide the South Central region with a comprehensive understanding of psychological safety and a mechanism to measure progress.



Figure 2: Human factors model

The human factors methodology, represented in figure 2, demonstrates how the model is operationalised.

Psychological safety: developed through specific team briefing management, role modelling behaviours, acceptance, reporting and learning from error, providing opportunities to ask for support, and encouraging staff engagement.

SBAR (situation, behaviour, assessment, recommendation): a structured communication tool promoting professional autonomy.

Team briefing: daily team huddles to resolve barriers to effective working, raising risks and concerns before harm is caused, and an opportunity to promote wellbeing and successes.

Protected time: ring-fenced time for managers and teams to have quality conversations about non-urgent matters, to promote live and responsive management oversight.

Feedback, reflection, and learning: intended to create an environment conducive to psychological safety and draw the other elements of the learning organisation approach together to drive learning and encourage the development of an open learning culture.

The initial feedback from the region was positive with staff looking forward to the structure and support that the model would bring to the PDU. The following early reflections have been made by staff.

Team briefings:

"Has brought teams together."

"Has helped PPs highlight their own good work/good news stories shared more readily."

"Encourages individual reflection on wellbeing."

Protected time and SBAR:

"Supports practitioners to structure opinion."

"Enables filtering of issues – better consideration of what needs to be escalated to SPOs and higher."

"Empowering probation practitioners to make recommendations."

"Slows down decision-making in a positive way."

"Level of crisis management reducing."

Fostering psychological safety can significantly improve employee satisfaction and retention. When staff feel safe to express their ideas, concerns, and mistakes without fear of retribution, they are more likely to be engaged and committed to their work. This supportive environment encourages continuous learning and development, which can lead to higher job satisfaction and lower turnover rates. By prioritising psychological safety and a learning culture, the organisation can create a more positive and stable work environment (Wietrak and Gifford, 2024).



For further information and guidance related to the human factors model, please email: humanfactors-probation@justice.gov.uk.

Example of effectiveness: Enabling environments standards, North East

The Royal College of Psychiatrists promotes and creates enabling environments (EE) standards, initially developed for secure environments, and later applied to psychologically informed planned environments (PIPEs), therapeutic communities, and approved premises (APs).



These standards, designed for residential facilities with closed populations, were adapted in two North East PDUs, aiming to create better workplaces for staff, visitors, and people on probation. While the physical environment was important, the focus was on the ethos, culture, and overall experience. This involved co-producing with people on probation, considering their views and those of the staff, and fostering inclusion.



The assessment process involved evaluating evidence against 10 core standards which could be found in a wide range of environments. These core standards were then supported with criteria, which provided specific guidance on how the underpinning 'enabling' values could be practically achieved.

The challenge for PDUs was to implement the EE model effectively, given the non-permanent population and diverse teams. In Stockton-on-Tees, the PDU and programmes team, along with partner agencies, worked together to meet the EE standards. This initiative, led by an SPO, highlighted hidden good practices, and focused positively on the softer skills of the staff. Probation teams within the building were enthused and motivated to engage in the process and showcase their work through a portfolio to provide the evidence for EE accreditation, but also widely recognising the excellent day-to-day work within the teams.

With a focus on health and wellbeing, heads of service in both Newcastle upon Tyne and Stockton emphasised the need for a shared identity to unite PDUs, commissioned rehabilitative services (CRS), and new staff members. The EE portfolio showcased everyday good practices, creating a productive and psychologically safe workplace.

The assessment of Stockton and Hartlepool PDU took place, and the panel's decision was awaited. It was recognised that one of the benefits of taking a PDU through this process was that, as well as sharing best practice examples, gaps could be identified and leaders could implement improvements, genuinely enhancing the environment for everyone involved. This approach could not only improve staff retention by making them feel valued, but also create a more supportive and effective working environment.

In compiling and presenting the finished portfolio to the assessors, one staff member commented: *"This is our folder of positivity."*

During our focus groups, a head of service talked passionately about the EE work and said: *"Enabling environments, [is] close to my heart. [It is a] vehicle for saying it's a good place to work, welcome, and positive environment. It says [to staff] something about we'll invest in you and make your career worthwhile."*

If the PDU receives formal EE accreditation, this will provide it with positive recognition and *“a mark of quality allowing a service to demonstrate that it has achieved an outstanding level of best practice in creating and sustaining a positive and effective environment.”*



You can read more about the enabling environments values and standards by following this link: [EE values and standards](#).

Example of effectiveness: Senior leader engagement with PQiP cohorts, Wales

In Wales, senior leaders wanted to maximise a sense of organisational belonging from the outset of staff employment. The regional probation director (RPD) was keen to build relationships and enable senior managers and staff to feel more connected, and thereby improve communication. To promote this, they devised a model in which a senior manager adopted a cohort of PQiP learners from commencement of their training. The leader joined the group for events throughout their programme, and offered opportunities for discussion and feedback.

The Head of Operations told us:

“I wanted to align myself to a PQiP cohort so that they could ask questions of me, but also understand the wider business. I joined their induction and join at regular interfaces when they meet to hear how their learning experience is going. This allows me to assure them that they are on track (they often feel overwhelmed) and are supported.”

The process provided an opportunity for PQiP learners to share ideas about things that could change to enhance their experience. One such example was that they felt that future PQiP learners would benefit from having a representative from the previous cohort talk about their progress to date; this was subsequently implemented. The experience also allowed senior managers to offer shadowing or join up with others across the wider business to enhance learning needs. It was agreed that this scheme would continue, with further leaders adopting future cohorts of learners.

Supporting continuous professional development

The [Council of Europe guidelines](#) for the recruitment, selection, education, training, and professional development of prison and probation staff (Council of Europe, 2019, see also p.11 above) emphasised the importance of maintaining training and skills throughout a career, recommending that: *“in-service training be linked with frameworks for continuous professional development (CPD).”* Regular reviews of training were recommended to ensure its relevance to individual roles, and supervision should be used to assess training needs and opportunities for professional growth. These points underscore the necessity of a well-trained, professional workforce with access to continuous development opportunities to ensure high-quality probation services.

Research has consistently shown that CPD is linked to improved staff retention. A systematic review published in the journal *Healthcare* found that continuing job education and

professional development were associated with increased intention to stay in a current job, decreased intention to leave, and reduced employee turnover (Shiri *et al.*, 2023).

Example of effectiveness: Staff career development events, North East

A staff career development event was held twice yearly in the North East probation region, targeting all staff grades. These sessions were initiated by the RPD to support career progression, enhance understanding of the success profiles recruitment process, and deter staff from leaving the region for career advancement. As exit interview feedback in the North East highlighted career progression as a key driver of attrition, these sessions formed a crucial component of the region's retention action plan.

The full-day, face-to-face event included an opening presentation from the RPD and additional guest speakers, such as heads of service and staff in different roles. Speakers shared their application and interview experience, and provided advice as both an interviewer and interviewee. The local human resource (HR) team presented information on success profiles and career development resources. There was also a section on the inclusive panel member scheme presented by the regional equalities manager.

The second part of the event provided staff with an opportunity to attend a mock interview. The HR team set the questions, the panel was made up of leaders and managers from the business, and feedback was provided to the interviewee immediately after. There was also an opportunity to attend a statement of suitability and CV writing workshop.

The sessions were well attended by staff from all roles across the region. There had been three events since May 2023, which demonstrated the region's commitment to investing time in talking to staff about success profiles, and how to do good applications and interviews to support career development and succession planning.

Feedback from delegates was extremely positive, with comments that valued the interactive nature of the event and useful material.

"Very useful re mock interviews, hear from HR etc. Had a real benefit. I participated; it was a useful set of reminders for me and to learn about up-to-date stuff. Staff really benefited from it."

"Hearing from ACOs¹⁵ who have been successful and unsuccessful in applying for different jobs and what their experiences had been. They appeared to be open and honest, which was nice and helpful."

"I wasn't able to get an interview until I attended this session."



[The North East probation region has shared the event slides here.](#)

Example of effectiveness: Master's programme opportunities, HMPPS

The HMPPS master's programmes, autumn 2023, offered two part-time master's degree programmes designed for professionals in the CJS.

¹⁵ ACO – area chief officer; now known as head of function in the Probation Service.

- The **master's degree in `applied criminology, penology, and management'** at the University of Cambridge focused on changes, challenges, and leadership in criminal justice. The two-year programme offered 12 places for middle managers identified for higher roles within the next 18-24 months. The programme included three two-week teaching blocks each year, combining online and on-campus learning.
- The **master's in community and criminal justice leadership** at De Montfort University targeted aspiring leaders in the justice sector, requiring them to have a 2:2 degree or equivalent and be at a band 4 or above (prison, HQ) or band 3 or above (probation service). The programme, also with 12 places, included modules on leadership, criminology theory, and risk management, and a dissertation.

The application process involved nominations, supporting statements, and endorsements from senior leaders, with additional support available for applicants with learning or neurodiversity needs.

We spoke with Kyle Hart, who was undertaking the master's programme at DMU. He told us:

"I am currently a QDO for the Probation Service in the West Midlands. I applied for the community and criminal justice leadership master's due to the applicability to practice that the modules and course content offered.

I am really enjoying how things are going on the master's [degree]. I have learnt so much already about the qualities and attributes of influential leaders. The course has helped me to develop my own leadership style through thought-provoking discussions and debates with current HMPPS leaders and highly renowned academics in the CJS - these have been great!

Regarding professional development, the teaching blocks are in-person at the university which is better for supporting my learning and focus ... the module content allows me to reflect on my own practice and the wider world of the CJS ... I have also particularly enjoyed debating critical issues of positionality, politics, intersectionality, and diversity ... the master's [degree] is helping me to develop my analytical thinking and critical questioning skills, and really has got me thinking much more strategically about the work I do. I know that these are all great skills and attributes needed to be an innovative manager and authentic leader in the Probation Service, so it's great that I am getting to develop these with the help of a formal higher education package."

Providing access to academic qualifications demonstrated a commitment to investing in staff development. The master's programmes support those aspiring to be leaders within the organisation, but also require learners to think about the theory that sits behind practice that is ever-evolving. Developing critical reasoning is a valuable skill that can be applied in all areas of work, and supports the wider development of the service.

Reward and recognition

Effective reward and recognition programmes are essential for boosting employee engagement, motivation, and retention. Simple gestures like saying "thank you," "well done" or "congratulations," as well as team celebrations, can make a significant impact. However, due to busy workloads and constant changes in the workplace, achievements and milestones can sometimes go unnoticed, leading to feelings of disengagement and devaluation among employees.

Now, more than ever, it is crucial for leaders to focus on appreciating and rewarding employees to enhance job satisfaction and overall engagement. Cotton *et al.* (2022) in their research suggest that the following are important to consider in reward and recognition schemes.

Clear objectives – setting specific, measurable goals for the reward and recognition programme helps ensure its success. This includes defining what behaviours or achievements will be recognised and how.

Employee involvement – involving employees in the creation and refinement of the programme ensures it resonates with them and addresses their needs. This can include surveys or focus groups to gather input.

Inclusivity – a successful programme should be inclusive, recognising the diverse contributions of all employees. This means considering different roles, departments, and levels within the organisation.

Alignment with organisational values – the programme should reflect the core values and culture of the organisation. This helps reinforce desired behaviours and creates a sense of shared purpose.

Equitable and transparent incentive programmes – designing fair and unbiased incentive programmes is crucial. This includes ensuring that all employees have equal opportunities to be recognised and rewarded.

The civil service, including the Probation Service and HMPPS, offers various reward and recognition opportunities, such as cash awards, referral bonuses, honorary and informal recognition, and special awards such as the Butler Trust Awards and King's Honours, all aimed at motivating employees, enhancing performance, and fostering a positive work environment.

Example of effectiveness: Staff-led reward and recognition, North East

In the North East probation region, we heard that North Tyneside and Northumberland PDU decided to use its annual reward and recognition budget in a different way. With the ethos of *"celebrating the work of the PDU in a meaningful way"*, staff were asked to nominate colleagues within six probation awards categories:

1. North Tyneside staff member of the year
2. Northumberland staff member of the year
3. PDU staff member of the year
4. Special recognition award
5. Going above and beyond award
6. Best team player award.

The PDU also sought to align the celebration of work with engaging people on probation service user awards, providing the opportunity to recognise the progress that people on probation had made under probation supervision. Staff were invited to nominate someone they felt had made significant progress in their lives for one of three 'inspiration awards'. – intended to reward progress made by people who had improved their lives or the lives of others as part of their rehabilitation journey.

The PDU received around 40 nominations and the joint event was held in October 2024 at the local town hall. Key partners and probation senior leads attended to present the awards. Winners were given certificates and gifts, and all winners and nominees were given a token gift, thank-you cards, and letter signed by the head of service, with the comments and feedback received from their colleague's nominations included.

This innovative approach was well received by practitioners and managers within the PDU:

"Staff felt valued and inspired by the discussions with colleagues on the day, but also by the service users who won as well. They were really pleased that there was no agenda to the awards other than recognising people for their good work – it wasn't tied up in another probation agenda; rather it was personal and showed how valued people were ... People are very keen for it to go ahead next year and I think it would be even better, and a lot more would engage based on feedback."

"A great opportunity to get together and recognise the hard work and dedication of staff at a local level, including celebrating the success of those on probation. This would be welcomed again in future."

"An enjoyable experience to be both recognised and celebrate the success of others. Particularly liked that all nominees were also presented with a letter detailing the comments submitted in support of nominations so, despite maybe not getting an award, the notion of being appreciated and valued was shared amongst all."

"I think it was a positive event for all involved and it was a reminder/recognition of the good work we do ... I think the process of nominating colleagues and receiving the feedback from nominations was a definite morale boost! It was nice to have an afternoon away from the office too and properly catch up with colleagues. I'm an advocate for making it a yearly event."

This is an effective example of how doing something different with an established process can ignite passion and motivation in individuals and teams. Investing in innovative ways of showing appreciation for employees is essential to maintain engagement and retention in the workforce.



Reflection questions

For human resource teams and managers:

- Are the drivers of attrition in your region or PDU fully understood? Are there differences between teams or PDUs, and have the reasons for any disparity been considered?
- How do you actively assess and support a positive culture in your team?
- How are staff supported to access continuous professional development opportunities?
- Are reward and recognition used and promoted regularly?

Key take-aways:

Retention of the workforce requires:



positive recruitment processes by ensuring those applying for roles understand the culture and values of the service and nature of the role they are applying for



staff to feel valued by senior leaders and managers, which will make them more likely to stay, even when the work is demanding



investment and encouragement of staff development to motivate practitioners to feel engaged in their role and have an improved sense of job satisfaction



reward and recognition to take many forms, from thanking staff sincerely for their work to providing forms of reward, all of which are important and valued by staff.

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