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Lost in transition? The personal and professional challenges for probation leaders engaged in delivering public sector reform

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Abstract

The outsourcing and transfer of labour in the contexts of policing, prisons and courts illustrate that, even in a national context, these transitions are not uniform. Rather, there are a diverse set of ‘privatisation journeys’ that can be taken and that need to be understood. Our focus in this article is on the experience of probation leaders who, under the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) reform programme, were charged with stewarding their organisation from the public sector, through a 10-month transitional period, and into the full relinquishing of ownership to the private sector. It is an account of how, with no clear ‘transition and transformation’ precedent to follow, a locally-based senior management team from one probation trust engaged with the task of implementing organisational change during a period of great uncertainty. We explore managers’ engagement with the language, working styles and vision of engineering transformational change and how they processed and began to articulate the challenges of new ownership, both for themselves (as individuals) and for their organisation (as a collective). We examine the resilience of the organisational culture

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at senior management level; the operational dynamism of leaders to embrace change; and the extent to which senior managers felt able to participate in, and take ownership of, the new Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) they were charged with forming.

Keywords

community rehabilitation companies, organisational change, Transforming Rehabilitation, leadership

Introduction

The launch of the TR reform programme represented the most profound change in the structure of probation services in the history of offender management services (Ministry of Justice, 2013). At its core was the splitting of probation services from 35 public sector probation trusts into a much smaller public National Probation Service (NPS) – responsible for the management and supervision of high-risk offenders – and 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies where a blend of public, private and third sector organisations would bid for and deliver services to medium- and low-risk offenders. In this article we draw on observational and interview-based research with the Senior Management Team from one case study CRC as they set about establishing and then running a new organisation. Capitalising on access granted to us by the Chief Executive of the former probation trust from which the CRC emerged, our research spanned the period March 2014 to July 2015: that is, from immediately prior to the dissolution of the trust to a point in time some six months after new owners had taken full responsibility for the CRC.

In other articles we have explored the impact of the TR reforms on the organisational identities of staff (Robinson et al., 2016); the development of occupational cultures (Burke et al., 2016); and the challenges facing privatised probation services in negotiating their organisational legitimacy (Robinson et al., 2017). Our narrower focus here is on the professional and personal reflections of the senior management team in our case study CRC whose responsibility it was to establish a new organisation and guide it through the procurement process in readiness for new owners to assume control in February 2015. Having recorded and analysed senior managers' unfolding experiences, we argue that there were four identifiable phases of transition – Absorbing, Adapting, Owning, and Relinquishing – through which members of the team progressed sequentially. We further argue that, ultimately, this process was not only intensely draining for the individuals concerned, but also that many of their good intentions were 'lost in transition' during a period of great uncertainty.

At a time when the Ministry of Justice has announced its intention to prematurely end the contracts to run CRCs (Ministry of Justice, 2018), we feel the insights from senior managers' experiences of engineering organisational change provide compelling lessons which authors of future policy reform should consider. Our research suggests that the professional judgement and practice wisdom of

probation leaders ought to inform how change is managed and implemented. In the original TR reform programme, senior probation managers saw their roles morph from leaders (seeking to inspire change in establishing new and novel ways to deliver rehabilitation services) to managers (increasingly concerned with short-term targets, accountability and procedures). As one senior manager reflected in interview, when the CRC had moved to new ownership, 'we are transitioned but not transformed' (Respondent 3, July 2015). This article seeks to capture both how the transformative ambitions of TR struggled to be realised in practice, and the personal and professional toll the task of implementing profound organisational change had on senior probation leaders in one case study area.

Our study, background and context

This article capitalises on a unique opportunity to observe a period of profound change in the restructuring of probation services in one case study area from immediately prior to the splitting of the existing public sector probation service (from March 2014) through to their operation within a private sector based Community Rehabilitation Company (in June 2015). The research team conducted a total of 120 interviews with staff at all levels of the organisation¹ across four 'sweeps' of research activity in April–June 2014; September–November 2014; December–January 2015 and then March–April 2015 at crucial moments in the transformation process. In respect of the senior management team specifically, each of the eight members of this group was interviewed at least six times between March 2014 and July 2015. These interviews were supplemented by ethnographic fieldwork that saw the research team observe over 120 hours of routine management meetings, planning sessions, leadership forums, and, in time, engagement meetings with new owners.

That the research was independently funded was important in securing participants' engagement with the project. The senior management team accommodated the research because they were keen to capture the experiences of staff at a moment of profound change. They also anticipated that our independent engagement with staff at all levels within the organisation could help with ongoing efforts to shape a new organisation and sensitise senior managers to the particular concerns and experiences of their staff. As a research team we produced reports that were made available to the management team and then disseminated throughout the organisation with assurances that all who participated did so in confidence and anonymously. Those assurances of anonymity extend here to the leadership group where we present data that is not directly attributable to specific individuals or their roles. For context what we can say is that the eight person strong leadership team were drawn from a range of practice leadership, corporate management and organisational development roles and half of the group were career probation practitioners. Three of the group had been with the trust for less than four years, with the others having been employed in the area for between six and 32 years. Half of the group were relatively new in senior management positions (having served less than four years in such roles) whilst others had more extensive probation leadership

experience in the case study area, and in some cases from other probation areas. Data from all senior managers features in this paper.

Phase 1: Absorbing

The TR reform programme represented the latest in a sequence of attempts to engineer change and engage in the partial privatisation of probation services (Burke and Collett, 2016). The experienced probation managers recalled previous efforts at reform – ‘we knew they wouldn’t leave us [probation] alone’ (Respondent 4, April 2014) – but recognised how profoundly different the unravelling of TR would prove to be:

We’ve had testers before, historically, little bits taken from round the edge... but I remember the teleconference with Chris Grayling [in September 2013]. We were all sat there, this is really it... yes, this is it. (Respondent 7, April 2014)

The launch of the consultation on probation reform in early 2013 confirmed in the minds of senior managers that reform was coming. However, symbolically, it was the teleconference with the Justice Secretary that marked the start of an intense 18-month period that locked them into routine engagements with the Ministry of Justice overseeing the project, and charged the managers with responsibility for mobilising a CRC. At this time the senior managers were part of a larger team within the trust and were working closely with colleagues who would, by May 2014, be working in a separate organisation (the NPS). As we have argued elsewhere, the loss of professional relationships and of rooted local organisational working cultures was difficult for the majority of staff who endured the partitioning of probation services (Robinson et al., 2016). However, the senior managers, some of whom had joined the probation service and practised with their NPS counterparts and who were now actively involved in the allocation process which would split staff groups, experienced this unease earlier and arguably more acutely than less senior colleagues.

For senior managers contemplating moving into the CRC their sense of personal uncertainty was even more salient as a result of the frustration and resentment some harboured towards the underpinning principles of the reform programme and the deep anxieties they had about the future model of probation services built into the policy. There was evident antagonism that the policy narrative of needing to introduce change fed into ‘stereotypical perceptions of probation’ (Respondent 7, April 2014) and there was a strong feeling that government ministers should have done more to protect the professional reputation of probation services. Whilst all managers recognised the scope for reforming probation services, all needed a clearer rationale for breaking apart the service, especially when they felt the alternative vision was being so poorly articulated and justified:

Ministers needed to be clearer about what they wanted to achieve in a more evidence-based style than in a headline grabbing way... that they haven’t hasn’t been helpful

for probation. I think what people have picked up on, or what they have interpreted it as, probation is not effective because reoffending rates are so high. That is not the case. They are factually incorrect about that. (Respondent 6, March 2014)

Personal uncertainty is an important condition present in many social circumstances and has the capacity to induce alarming, arousing, anxiety-provoking and ego-depleting reactions (Van den Bos, 2009). At times of great organisational change the extent to which individuals feel personal uncertainty are even more pronounced. At an individual level managers reported their concern about the longer-term prospects for their careers, anxieties about where they 'fit in the new world' (Respondent 2, March 2014), about their unease in overseeing the process of allocating staff into either the CRC or NPS, and of being a leader through a change process they had not initiated. When they judged the advice and guidance from the Ministry of Justice as artificial or contradictory this added to their sense of personal uncertainty:

In one moment in clear terms we're told you are two separate organisations, two completely separate commercial entities and you are not to breach commercial confidentiality, and then we're told Senior NPS Managers have been left without PAs or enough desk space so can our Corporate Services manage their diary, spare them an office until it's sorted to keep things going . . . it feels that none of this has been thought through and it makes you fearful for more fundamental flaws later down the line. (Respondent 1, June 2014)

Consequently, absorbing the impact of TR for managers went beyond concerns about their own individual prospects and tapped into what they considered to be a broader attack on their shared professional integrity, and of the vocational commitment and integrity they felt probation work stood for (see Mawby and Worrall, 2013). The failure of ministers to stand up for probation services made managers resentful, but just as hurtful for some was the perceived implication that only through innovation and private investment could service provision be improved. As Van den Bos (2009) has argued, individuals inevitably react negatively when they feel their cultural values and norms are violated by events, and this can thwart processes to cope with heightened levels of personal uncertainty fostering deep anxiety:

We are not second class citizens in the CRC and the work we do is meaningful and serious . . . this is still a very honourable profession and we have a duty to steward probation through to its next iteration, being authentic and taking staff with us in that. (Respondent 8, June 2014)

The sense of duty to a wider 'probation ethos' (see Burke *et al.*, 2016) and of managers taking responsibility to protect these core values in shaping the organisational future of the CRC came to characterise how the leadership group responded to the challenge of implementing TR. There was a feeling of being abandoned by ministers and, in time, by the Ministry of Justice, who had to frame their relationships

with CRCs differently within the context of commercial confidentiality and administering the procurement process. In the midst of what the senior managers considered to be a malaise in terms of the evolving of probation services, the leadership group pulled together to proactively engage with the reform programme. In the belief that an operationally successful CRC would be allowed to continue to function undisturbed by new owners, the senior management team's collective ambition was to create the 'best CRC we can be' (Respondent 4, April 2014).

Phase 2: Adapting

Led by the Chief Executive, members of the senior management team were adapting to the uncertainty they were experiencing, and were trying to proactively cut through the sense of abandonment and lack of clarity about what 'transition' entailed. At this point, months from the splitting of probation services, they still harboured deep concerns about the nature and form of the reforms but sensed 'the momentum behind them had created a sense of inevitability' (Respondent 5, April 2014). As one senior manager explained:

You have to suspend belief and accept things that wouldn't ordinarily be credible, this is the way I'm dealing with this and I've got to find a way of getting through this and getting everybody else through because it has to come right, it doesn't matter what's happening out there this is bigger than that, this is still an honourable profession and it really is why you come to work in the first place. (Respondent 4, April 2014)

'Transformational leadership' describes the set of behaviours and actions used by managers to engineer change through trying to visualise future operational goals and create the positive conditions within an organisation to achieve these (Avolio, 2011). Transformational leaders, specifically, offer followers a 'purpose', aiming to motivate employees by focusing on their moral values, raising their consciousness of moral issues and stimulating followers to mobilise their energies to improve conditions (Burns, 1978). The Chief Executive in our case study area was displaying 'charismatic leadership' (Avolio, 2011) and placing themselves at the centre of efforts 'to steward probation through to its latest iteration'. To help create conditions and behaviours to proactively facilitate transformational leadership processes they appointed a leadership coach to support senior managers who were also encouraged to attend management training to help foster a culture of learning and sharing ideas. To create an 'atmosphere of psychological safety' (Kavangh and Ashkanasy, 2006: 86) where the group could engage in new behaviours and test the waters of the new culture of working, time was built in for sessions where managers would share their experiences (and anxieties) of implementing organisational change.

At the core of leaders' collective efforts to cut through the heightened uncertainty and anxiety – to try to 'own' the change process – was the attention paid to the creation of values and principles that would underpin the operation and structure of the CRC. Leaders spent a number of days outlining what they considered to be the cultural norms and ethical standards they wished to embed in the CRC, and the

collective discussion and writing out of these by senior managers helped cement shared ownership of and responsibility for the organisation. In much the same way that events can destabilise individual levels of uncertainty, so Van den Bos (2009) argues it is possible for groups to collaborate and create conditions that stimulate and further cultural norms and values, and in the process build confidence and esteem. The act of negotiating values and the sense that this allowed managers to draw strength from their practitioner biographies served to exhilarate members of the leadership group amidst the uncertainty:

Genuine values [are] being built into the CRC, [values] that come from the right place [and there is] a genuine belief from us all that we want to include service users in the service delivery and get their views and respond to them. That will be something new, something that sets us apart, and we want all staff to generate ideas and be as skilled as they possibly can be. (Respondent 7, March 2014)

In the immediate weeks before the split our observations and interviews were capturing a stimulating time for senior managers as they sought to instil a transformational leadership strategy. At a time of great uncertainty when senior managers were feeling tired and working long hours to keep the CRC ship afloat, they were feeling engaged in a process of driving change. The Chief Executive routinely sought to anchor the work of CRC in rehabilitation and, in doing so, 'articulating a vision that [would] appeal to followers, motivating them to achieve the vision by cultivating optimism and meaning' (Brough *et al.*, 2016: 44).

We make rehabilitation our business and we find ways more innovative than ever in how we work with partners and the community in that... we've got to show that we've got all the resources, the assets, the experience and the wisdom to keep people inside the CRC, not keep shipping them back to the NPS because that's where your reputation and – I don't know what you call it – profit, Payment by Results (PbR), that's what it will depend on. For me, it's reframing it for the staff like that. (Respondent 4, March 2014)

The emphasis on rehabilitation was an important hook for the delivery of a transformational leadership approach. The focus on rehabilitative work was seen as rooted in probation traditions of assisting and befriending service users, to deliver on the ambition to 'pull through' (Respondent 1, July 2014) and 'draw upon' (Respondent 7, July 2014) the 'best bits of probation' (Respondent 2, August 2014). Some managers argued that working to rehabilitate medium and low-risk offenders was considered to be 'closer to the concept of probation that we would understand' (Respondent 3, June 2014) than the inevitable emphasis on supervision and management of high-risk cases that would characterise the work of NPS colleagues. But what the operationalisation of rehabilitation also allowed leaders to do was to create a practice narrative that could be more inclusive and empowering for CRC staff. The capacity to be creative and engage in new rehabilitative practices and engaging new partners was seen to help give the CRC distinctness and originality. It enabled the intuitive ambitions to support people from desisting from offending and

to build more positive lifestyles, whilst also providing a framework to negotiate the attention required to link activity and payment:

We all wince when we talk about profit and income generation, that's the bit when I feel most vulnerable. But the focus on rehabilitation, the focus on engaging the community in that, that is how I've built my career, that's desistance principles and that brings back, it helps me think about what does it mean to be authentic here, what message can I get out to staff? (Respondent 2, June 2014)

Phase 3: Owning

The 1st of June 2014 marked the start of the period when the CRC stood alone on the route to new ownership. The competition phase was still open and prospective bidders were forming relationships in readiness to enter the procurement process. Rules of commercial confidentiality limited the involvement prospective bidders could have with CRC organisations which had assumed responsibility for delivering services to medium and low-risk offenders in the community. The weeks immediately prior to and following the 1st of June saw a number of events arranged to launch the CRC, and senior managers were prominent at events in articulating the vision and aspirations for the organisation in the interim. The reality among frontline staff, however, was that the transition into new ownership was generating occupational cultures within probation as some embraced change, some remained fairly neutral, whilst others were much more resistant (see Burke et al., 2016).

At a time when managers wanted to pursue an avowedly positive outlook for the CRC, the realities of ownership meant that the leadership group found the first six months of the CRC's operation exceptionally challenging. The routine turgid reality of TR served to compromise the optimism and drive within the leadership group. Rather than experience a drawing back of central interference, the increase in the frequency of engagements with teams from the Ministry of Justice and hosting routine visits from auditors had an inhibiting effect. At a time when leaders were concerned with creating a sustainable and enduring future for the CRC the heightened level of scrutiny – as part of a series of measures facilitating the process of the share sale – reminded managers of the temporal nature of the operations of the CRC:

The last few months have been melancholic. Every Monday morning, two hours, review the transition programme – How are we doing on that? Have we tested this? All driven from the centre. Monday evening, next bulletin arrives from the national programme, 10 or more attachments, requests for more information. Thursday, 3 pm to 5 pm Senior Management Team (SMT) dial-in, written updates and where we are up to, not just taking the national bulletin, but what's happening here. Take those messages and get them out to your teams. Monday, it all starts again. (Respondent 1, August 2014)

At times the CRC was providing regular feedback on 37 different workstreams across all areas of its operation. Longer-term thinking for organisational ambitions was being displaced by the short-term concentration on targets in a very

challenging practice climate. Problems were occurring at the interface between the NPS and CRCs as cases were being transferred and as new working forms were being bedded in. Managers were also having to confront partner uncertainty over the role of the CRC, as well as contending with reports that local sentencers were uneasy about the NPS referring cases to 'the private sector service' (Respondent 7, September 2014). There was no investment forthcoming to innovate in practice and managers were having to reconcile with 'fundamental challenges to the integrity of probation work' (Respondent 6, September 2014) that disconcerted them and that they knew would play out badly with staff.

Relatively modest numbers of Probation Officer grade staff were assigned to the CRC and within weeks of the split the NPS was advertising posts that some of those working in the CRC had indicated they would apply for. The management team were already having to contemplate the future role of Probation Officer grade staff (e.g. whether they would have to assume the role of senior practitioners and mentors to lesser qualified Probation Service Officers, rather than carrying their own case-loads). Of even greater concern was impressing upon practitioners the need to prioritise and be more selective in who they were working with, as well as how and when:

This is the biggest single cultural battle that we're going to have to face. 'I know you want to help them and I know they look as though they need help but they're just not ready, they're just not there. You could work with them from now until kingdom come and you won't make a jot of difference to them, so we can't afford for you to spend that time on them' ... it sounds horrible but that's what you're going to have to do, these people yes, they're ready to go, just focus on them ... get it [the message] in a professional way and not just in an economic way. (Respondent 3, August 2014)

For senior managers, the challenge of supporting a staff group who were experiencing change differently and much later than senior managers themselves was significant for the latter during this period. As leaders the management team had sought to take ownership of the transformation process and, some months previously, had started the process of working through the emotions of loss and separation prior to the split. However, it was now the turn of staff groups to experience the loss of colleagues and partitioning of work spaces, and to voice their deeply held concerns for the longer-term prospects of their roles and organisation (Robinson *et al.*, 2016). The rawness and scale of anxiety was impactful enough on staff, but what made trying to respond to and support their staff even more difficult was that for some leaders the voiced concerns mirrored similar anxieties they were still trying to manage:

As a leader, to be authentic in all this, that has been the hardest thing that has challenged me the most. Be authentic with your people that you're managing because the minute I start not being authentic, that's when I've lost it, within me and also my influence out there. Some introduce themselves as the CRC. I can't do that. I say 'I work for the CRC, it used to be the old probation service'. I'm still making the links back,

I'm slowly disconnecting myself, but in my heart I'm a probation officer and trying to help people have a better life. (Respondent 2, January 2015)

The concern expressed by staff about how the frantic pace of change at the point of the split, and of a lingering anxiety about their integrity as leaders, sowed the first seeds of doubt in how the group had sought to steward the change process:

We ran the launch events in the early days and asked staff to sign up to those values... In hindsight we needed to acknowledge that many weren't ready to do that and many months on many still aren't. They are hurting and they're frightened and we may have had the effect of pushing them further away by trying to be too positive at a time when people needed to process loss as we had. (Respondent 7, January 2015)

Phase 4: Relinquishing

The Ministry of Justice announced the preferred bidders for the 21 CRC Contract Package Areas on 29 October 2014.² The new owners of the CRCs were a mix of primarily private and third sector providers working in consortia. Some owners had secured one or two contract package areas, whilst others had won multiple contracts. The preferred bidders would take until December 2014 to sign the contracts to deliver probation services with the expectation that after a period of due diligence and 'trueing up' the performance data they would assume full responsibility for service delivery from 1 February 2015.

For senior managers there was no one moment of relinquishing responsibility, but rather the commencement of a set of processes over a drawn-out and shifting timetable in the transfer of power. During this period (late October 2014 to summer 2015) managers had to reconcile overseeing business as usual whilst at the same time establishing working relationships with members of the new owner's 'mobilisation team'. Throughout they were having to comprehend what the relinquishing of ownership entailed for them, their career, and the CRC:

I came to realise that this [new owner announcement] isn't the end and its getting difficult... when the transition started we had dates when things had to be done... we galvanised ourselves into action and we had a target... we've done all those [and] we haven't transformed into this new way of working and it has slowed right down - we have new owners but we don't have the model of delivery, we don't have the IT, we don't have anything that makes us different. (Respondent 8, March 2015)

In keeping with the uncertain nature of the transition process to that point, the date set for announcing new owners had changed on a number of occasions, and whilst Ministry of Justice contract managers were on hand to oversee the process of transition, managers reported being unclear about the milestones of change and the processes that would be followed. The announcement of new owners was a dramatic and stage-managed process as envelopes in each contract package area were opened simultaneously by Ministry of Justice contract managers with

respective Chief Executives in attendance. But even then, managers still found the process anti-climactic:

We hear who the new owners are and you race around, look at their website, see who is in the partnership, read their initial communique, but you couldn't help think it doesn't really change anything, we're still beholden to delivering to the contract, we've got the Offender Rehabilitation Act about to hit and yet again we've just got to keep the staff going with such little information to work off. (Respondent 1, January 2015)

A series of engagement and 'mobilisation' meetings followed, first between the Chief Executive of the CRC and representatives of the new owner's team, and then meetings involving wider numbers of managers and staff. Running in parallel to these, a team of representatives from the new owners based themselves in offices at the CRC to true up the data. There was an acknowledgement that some of the data provided by the Ministry of Justice during the procurement process had been inaccurate, and this meant often calling in senior managers and other staff individually for clarification. Managers routinely reported being uncertain during this period: there was uncertainty about who 'owned and led the CRC' (Respondent 5, February 2015) at this time, and uncertainty too about the vagaries of commercial confidentiality in discerning what could and could not be discussed with new owners, especially prior to the signing of the contracts in December. Rather than being taken over, managers felt that they were being devolved of leadership by stealth: encouraged to carry on with business as usual by the new owners but being unsure of their capacity to innovate and lead, and equally unsure of where they sat within what they felt was a suffocating tripartite governance structure under the new arrangements:

We have this infernal triangle, the MoJ [Ministry of Justice], the owners and the CRC, applicable to all areas of the business. Take estates. MoJ own the buildings and they decide whether a lease is renewed or not. The owners have the bottom line they are trying to meet and part of that has got to be reached by rationalising the estate. But the CRC have to deliver services and want a presence and base in the community but don't know how long they will remain there . . . it's a stifling set of tangled processes driven by different priorities reliant on each other. (Respondent 3, August 2015)

What emerged powerfully for leaders was that change wasn't going to be sudden and clinical; rather, it would be drawn out and vague. The new owners hadn't arrived with a portfolio of new ideas to help innovate practice, nor were there going to be huge injections of staff to bolster the CRC. There was a first wave of change consultants who managed the early engagement meetings, and these were often senior managers moved in from other areas of wider organisational structures (beyond probation specifically) or employed short-term to drive the transition process. In some cases individuals had previously worked in the criminal justice sector at senior levels and whilst this offered some reassurance that they 'knew the business', there was also concern about how adaptable thinking from the 'old ways of

probation' (Respondent 4, March 2015) could be given how rapidly the sector had changed in such a short space of time. The extent to which new owners downplayed their intent to enact change too hastily saw some managers express sympathy for those who had entered the 'TR circus' and were quickly having to reconcile what contract package areas they had won, whilst being 'unclear themselves about what it is that they need to be' (Respondent 3, January 2015).

The CRC was now one of a number acquired by the new parent company which was in turn part of a much larger organisation. The potential to develop new partnerships in innovating rehabilitation services was seen positively by some in the management group. However, of greater impact was the feeling of moving away from the rooted and localised identity that had characterised their practice to date. For managers this compromised their relationships with local criminal justice partners, and they knew how impactful the loss of the strong local probation identity would be for staff:

If we needed to engage a housing provider or mentoring service we'd do that locally, draw on contacts we've used for years and we had that discretion, but now we aren't just a [regional] service we're much bigger and we have a supply chain of partners signed up to this and so it's to them that we have to go to and see what services are part of our umbrella organisation... there's a divide between us and partners we have worked with and that is something I know staff will find hard to comprehend, and it takes away our remit as local practitioner leaders. (Respondent 6, March 2015)

In getting to grips with the nuances of the challenges facing the mix of CRC areas they had acquired, the new owners established thematic groups to look at issues concerning, amongst other things, Through the Gate provision, performance management, and training. These national level groups would pull in representatives from senior management teams for routine meetings. Again, whilst many drew positives from this experience and appreciated the methodical way the new owners were trying to engage with practitioner voices, in the minds of some leaders it added to the sense of the leadership group breaking up:

We can't even meet together properly. We're being dragged down to London all the time and it is really unsettling, it is so difficult to get that time to say 'right, where are we with this?'. There are a lot of moving parts and what we're going through is a period of disintegration, not a massive emotional thing of disaggregation, [but] we had an integrated function as a CRC and that is slipping away, (Respondent 4, July 2015)

The CRC management team was meeting less frequently, and when they met it was now in the context of mobilisation meetings chaired by the new owners, where relationships and allegiances were still being very delicately and tentatively formed. New leadership voices were being introduced with 'a clearer and more uncompromising tone on the performance to contract' (Respondent 6, April 2015), and the uncertainty of the group to effect change individually and the danger of being seen to act as a collective impacted upon the well-being

and esteem of leaders. In the short-term they missed the opportunities to jointly reflect and share experiences of change. With the process of change being so drawn out, managers were a buffer between new owners being measured and patient in sharing new practice models and sharing organisational reform, and a staff group expectedly waiting for messages about the future direction of their organisation:

You're getting a lot of emotional response to what's happening at the minute and trying to absorb that, but at the same time maintain neutrality in the hope of positive things to come ... but the hooks into keeping people motivated aren't there and the danger is that if this all still goes on, job insecurity continues, we'll lose our stars and that's our risk at the moment. (Respondent 2, March 2015)

In the longer-term, the lack of a leadership collective saw some managers develop much deeper concerns and more enduring personal uncertainty. Managers increasingly questioned their capacity to effect change and questioned the currency of their professional judgement. In direct contrast to the bullish ambitions of creating the 'best CRC possible' (Respondent 8, April 2014) some managers now appeared much more timid and hesitant in how they could provide leadership. They found themselves working within new organisational structures that stretched beyond their immediate contract package area and in the process seemed unsure of the boundaries of their responsibilities:

I can remember saying to somebody, when these people take over the contracts 'it will really matter to me who comes out and shows their face first ... it matters to me that that person who comes in is a Chief Exec or next level down'. Now I think, 'who the bloody hell did I think I was?' You realise where you are in the pecking order, you're part of a much bigger industry now, a much bigger organisation and that probation voice is being lost. (Respondent 4, July 2015)

At a surface level the arrival of new owners had not led to a powerful moment of change in the operation of the CRC, and the process of relinquishing ownership was experienced as drawn out and subtle. However, the sense that 'the probation voice is being lost' (Respondent 4, July 2015) was something that impacted heavily upon some within the leadership group. The values and probation ethos the leaders had sought to sew into the fabric of the CRC now seemed, to some leaders, to be being eclipsed by new models of working. They were now employed – like many within the new privatised probation sector – by 'organisations that aren't organisations ... networks who form alliances' (Respondent 3, July 2015) as new forms of delivering public services. The appeal of working within dynamic organisational forms that would drift between and work across a variety of sectors appealed to some, but for others – as the two quotations below capture – the relinquishing of a distinct probation identity and the values inherent within it was a painful and intimately personal experience:

As a woman working in probation, it has been a great organisation to work for because we've been frontrunners in terms of gender [equality]; we were ridiculed and laughed at by society through the 1980s and 1990s until everybody caught up. They've met my challenges as a female, when they've had to be presented in terms of institutional sexism, so to see all those men in suits leading, I found awful, I felt I'd lost something there. (Respondent 2, July 2015)

Things are opening up and it's going to take away that kind of very committed, vocational element, almost, that you serve. It will become more of a job, and maybe people aren't as precious about it as we once were and whilst there isn't going to be a big overnight substantial change we will look back and go, 'Whoa, where did all those people go?'. Well, they retired or went into social services, wanted to remain public servants and this was not for them. (Respondent 5, January 2015)

Discussion and conclusions

Our case study of the professional and personal challenges of implementing the TR reform agenda illustrates how difficult a process this was for all involved – managers, staff, and the new owners. The processes undertaken for the transfer of responsibility for delivering probation services from the public sector into a devolved marketplace have been unique to this sector, involving as they have the creation of transitional CRC organisations which would operate independently during a prolonged procurement process, and prior to be taken under new ownership. As we have captured elsewhere (Robinson et al., 2016) it is inevitable that staff involved felt in a state of 'liminality': 'betwixt and between' the public and the outsourced; between the old and the new.

However, our focus here, specifically on senior managers, captures a series of experiences unique to this group. As leaders charged with implementing change they had to endure their own emotions of loss and separation earlier in the change cycle, at the same time as they had to interrogate and comprehend the detail of the unravelling TR reform agenda. The TR programme – 'a striking demonstration of tendencies that encompassed an unwillingness to seek out (particularly opposing) evidence of expert views' (Annison, 2018: 1080) – was, in leaders' minds, unnecessarily wide ranging in its scope and did not articulate a clear vision for how, in practice, the ambitions of the restructuring of probation provision would manifest themselves. Under threat was not just their personal career aspirations, but a deeper set of cultural norms and values – a 'probation ethos' (see Burke et al., 2016) – that underpinned how they believed people should be supported to live more positive lifestyles.

Faced with great uncertainty, and feeling decoupled from established support structures, the probation managers in our case study area sought to embrace what they understood as their *duty* to steward probation services through change, to collectively seek to shape a positive future for staff and service users alike. Led by the Chief Executive, the adoption of transformative leadership behaviours saw managers generate a vision for evolving probation practice, encouraging constant

reflection and jointly creating positive goals that characterised the probation practice they were seeking to protect. Mawby and Worrall (2013: 109) have illustrated how the rigours of probation practice and of change fatigue has the capacity to generate 'emotional tyranny'. TR, replete with the vagaries of the procurement processes and uncertainty around how boundaries between mixed consortia of practitioners would function, determined that levels of personal uncertainty were even more pronounced. The adoption then of a jointly authored vision for the CRC, one rooted in rehabilitation principles that would nullify the threat of business imperatives and translate established cultural norms and values, was exhilarating. As a management team they were enacting 'constructive [and] adaptive change' (Kotter, 1990: 4), being able to deliver what they considered authentic leadership by advancing a vision and providing direction for the CRC that would motivate and inspire staff by appealing to their needs, values and emotions.

In reality, however, the transitional phase of TR compromised these ambitions. First the intense management and scrutiny of performance in the run-up to the share sale and then the 'infernal triangle' (Respondent 3, January 2015) needed to negotiate key decisions became administratively burdensome. The lack of new investment stifled innovative intent and, rather than utilise new resources, managers had to adapt and mould the practice expertise available to them. The arrival of new owners – themselves as uncertain of exact processes and timelines for reform – was anti-climactic and managers' questioning and anxieties about their future roles (and the expertise they felt they had to offer) saw doubts about their legitimacy as leaders creep in. From being concerned with the longer-term pursuit of an aspirational vision to evolve offender rehabilitation services, increasingly the group was consumed by directing 'members towards organisational goals, of consistency, order and predictability' (Kotter, 1990: 4), as their role morphed from probation leaders to managers. They felt a great sense of responsibility to *steward* probation through to its next iteration, to *support* a staff group they understood found the process deeply unsettling, and to *maintain* 'business as usual' to support service users (Respondent 4, July 2014). Despite the new owners citing the strength of the CRC they'd inherited, the personal and professional toll on individuals in trying to deliver on all these demands was evident by the end of the study as the bullish ambitions for the CRC were replaced with more timid and less certain ambitions for rehabilitative services.

The transitional phase of CRCs operating between the splitting of probation services and the full transfer into new ownership was, by senior managers' own admission, 'a holding job concerned with just keeping things ticking over' (Respondent 6, February 2015). It was, though, a deeply unsettling period for all concerned, and in the process a number of things were lost in transition. Staff did leave the organisation and localised occupational cultures and working practices were usurped by a mosaic-like network of providers, each trying to pursue different brand identities (Burke et al., 2016). In the case study presented here the unrelenting challenges of implementing change – and of trying to wrestle ownership of an uncertain and poorly articulated change programme – has caused many experienced probation professionals to question their place in a new landscape for

probation services they have sought to help shape. Their professional judgement and experience meant they were concerned with the form and motive behind the reform programme at the start, and that same expertise determined they remained deeply concerned with how rehabilitation services could be delivered in fair and sustainable ways by the time the research came to an end.

The government's recent announcement (Ministry of Justice, 2018) that CRC contracts will end two years earlier than expected as part of a wider renewal of the TR policy suggests their fears were well founded. It also indicates that authors of future reform would be wise to meaningfully engage with the grounded insights of probation leaders, not least because, as our case study demonstrates, the way in which such changes are perceived or experienced in the light of prevailing cultural norms and values can be a significant barrier to implementation and undermine service delivery (Bishop and Waring, 2016). Senior managers play a crucial role in negotiating the institutional tensions inherent in a mixed economy of service provision at the inter-organisational, organisational and interpersonal levels. They are in the front-line of managing the conflicts that can emerge regarding the purposes, meaning and values of probation work. Understanding the shared experiences and views of those involved in the change process should therefore underpin any attempts at further reforming the structures and organisation of probation. However, the government's persistence in pursuing a model of marketisation means that once again CRC staff are facing another period of uncertainty that could potentially involve the prospect of a change of ownership, new delivery models, and absorption into a reorganised regional structure. As our case study has highlighted, managing staff through profound organisational upheaval requires individual and collective leadership, but such leadership is unlikely to flourish if it is stifled by ideologically driven initiatives, overly bureaucratic and unresponsive tendering processes and a climate of unrelenting uncertainty.

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Notes

1. Of the total of 120 semi-structured interviews undertaken, participants can be divided into four categories: members of the senior management team ($n = 8$); middle managers

- ($n = 21$); probation officers ($n = 16$); probation service officers ($n = 14$); and other support and operational staff ($n = 11$). A sub-sample of interviewees were interviewed on multiple occasions throughout the transition.
2. The list of preferred bidders included consortia that involved seven private companies, 16 charities and voluntary sector organisations and four staff mutuals. Multi-national companies Sodexo and Interserve with a range of rehabilitation charities were the preferred bidder to run 11 of the 21 contract package areas.

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