Article:

Article

A necessary but painful journey: Experiences of unification in a probation service region

Matthew Millings iD
Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Lol Burke iD
Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Harry Annison iD
University of Southampton, UK

Nicola Carr
University of Nottingham, UK

Gwen Robinson iD
University of Sheffield, UK

Eleanor Surridge
Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Abstract

In this article, we present some initial findings from the first year of a longitudinal study of the experiences of unification by staff in one Probation Service region. Their reaction to unification is explored as well as their hopes and fears regarding the newly unified service. Despite working in what was often presented as an unsettled

Corresponding Author:
Lol Burke, Liverpool John Moores University – Law, 98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool L3 5UZ, UK.
Email: L.Burke@ljmu.ac.uk

and fractured environment marked by on-going staff shortages – whilst at the same time having to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic – amongst most participants there remained a high level of loyalty to the probation profession (or the idea of probation). However, while many expressed optimism regarding the longer-term prospects for the unified organisation, this was also overlaid with concerns about how unification would play out in the short to medium term. Their enduring sense of commitment and loyalty to their role was also being tested by what some saw as overbearing pressure to manage risk, coupled with the fear of being exposed if people whom they supervised committed a Serious Further Offence.

Introduction

In June 2020, it was reported that alongside the return to the public sector of all those subject to probation supervision (announced some twelve months earlier) the delivery of unpaid work and structured interventions would also return to the public sector (Grierson, 2020). For many probation observers the decision appeared to be a welcome reversal of the *Transforming Rehabilitation* (TR) reforms introduced in 2013, which had created a two-tier organisational structure and had subsequently been the focus of sustained critiques from a range of stakeholders. By 2019, criticisms voiced by HM Inspectorate of Probation (2019), the National Audit Office (2019) and the House of Commons Justice Select Committee (2018) suggested the policy was foundering. This was seen in the failure of Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) to reduce reoffending or meet other key targets; the injection of millions of pounds of extra public investment to prop up struggling CRCs; limited evidence of innovation; underinvestment in staff and poor morale across the workforce; and reputational damage including a loss of confidence in probation among sentencers. However, as Tidmarsh (2020) notes the TR reforms merely exacerbated many of the long-standing issues faced by probation and were the culmination a prolonged period of reform.

The reconfiguration of probation into a single organisational entity within the planned 12-month timescale was undoubtedly ambitious, both in terms of its scale and complexity, 'with 113,000 cases and over 7000 staff from 54 separate organisations needing to be transferred, alongside the harmonisation of different operating models, cultures and processes' (Johal and Davies, 2022: 10). As such, the proposal to unify probation services heralded another fundamental change to the probation occupational field as old structures gave way to new ones, geographical boundaries were re-drawn and new reduced contracts for the provision of specific interventions were re-negotiated (Robinson, 2021). These developments also took place against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic that had forced the service to adopt remote working and had subsequently created significant backlogs in

the provision of unpaid work and accredited programmes (see Dominey et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2021).

In this article, we explore data from a first sweep of interviews conducted with probation staff in one of the twelve new probation regions in England and Wales one year after unification. These interviews took place in the context of a broader, longitudinal programme of research which aims to understand experiences and consequences of unification at local, regional, and national levels and from a variety of perspectives, including probation staff; senior managers; policy makers; people on probation; and external partners.[1] The current research builds upon an earlier study which examined the experiences of probation staff as they transitioned from public to private sector employment when the CRCs were first established in 2014–2015 (Burke et al., 2017; Millings et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2016). This earlier research captured considerable variations in the ways staff made sense of and subsequently adapted to the turbulent field around them (Burke et al., 2017). Less than a decade later, our current study will enable us to develop a more nuanced understanding of how staff deal with continuity and change in an ever-evolving occupational field. In this article, reporting on the experiences of operational staff in our case study area one year after unification, we consider their initial reactions to the decision to reunify probation and explore their experiences of the transition, particularly in respect of their roles, identities, and occupational cultures.[2] In closing, we reflect upon the levels of optimism and commitment to probation values, reported by our respondents and we consider what this might indicate about probation's uncertain future.

Methodology

Having secured university ethical approval and agreement from HMPPS to proceed with the study in February 2022, the research team conducted 56 semi-structured interviews with staff across the case study region between April and August 2022 to explore their experiences to date. Our case study area includes a number of former National Probation Service (NPS) regions and CRC organisations enabling the project to examine the dynamics of merging staff from public and private legacy organisations, as well as reflecting the potential diversity of experiences in terms of roles, organisational identities, and practice cultures.

Typical of the 12 Probation Service regions in England and Wales, the case study area is geographically diverse with major and densely populated metropolitan areas, a series of smaller towns, and much more rural and scarcely populated areas. Our sampling strategy for the first sweep of research involved targeting a representative mix of Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) throughout the region which enabled a focus on both those offices where legacy NPS and CRC staff had been co-located prior to unification, and those where unification involved the creation of newly amalgamated staff teams. In this first sweep of interviews, our concern was to capture continuity and change as experienced by probation staff and to understand how unification was being made tangible.

Through presentations to staff teams and providing assurances of anonymity and confidentiality we were able to engage directly with staff groups to promote the research and our generated sample was representative of the wider case study region in terms of the balance of participants' roles and the legacy organisations from which they were drawn. 46% of those interviewed were former employees of a CRC, 45% were previously employed by the NPS, and 9% had joined the organisation since unification in June 2021. 77% percent of the sample were female and 23% were male. Practitioners' length of service ranged from 8 months to 40 years, with an average probation career length of 15.3 years. In terms of organisational role(s), 17% were Senior Managers, 21% were Senior Probation Officers (SPO), 23% were Probation Officers (PO), 33% Probation Service Officers (PSO), and 6% were employed in administrative roles.

In the first of the three planned rounds of interviews, our questions in this first sweep focused on staff experiences during and beyond unification and covered four main themes. First, interviewees were asked to outline their employment histories within probation and their reaction to the news of unification. Secondly, they were asked to reflect on their experiences since June 2021 (the date of unification); to recall any memorable moments or events during and after the unification process; and to tell us about how well they felt unification had been managed and communicated to them. Third, respondents were asked about the working environment and general mood among staff in the organisation. The final set of questions asked them to outline their hopes and aspirations for the new organisation, about their loyalty, and their optimism for the future of the new service. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and were thematically coded using NVivo. The analysis of data for this paper – concerned as it is with staff experiences of the process of unification – was consistent in focusing on the chronology of living through organisational change that we used in our first project (Millings et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2016) and draws out some of the consistently strong and shared sentiments expressed by our sample across all of our four primary question themes. Our presentation of the data, in sequence, explores representative views of how staff consumed news of reunification; reflected on the practical and professional challenges that emerged within the new organisational structures they found themselves within; and how they made sense of theirs and others' ability to shape new coherent organisational identities in the immediate aftermath of unification and beyond. In the analysis that follows interview extracts have been attributed by role (Senior Managers; Senior Probation Officers (SPOs); Probation Officers (POs); or Probation Service Officers (PSOs)) and pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of participants.

Reactions to unification: Legacies and challenges

The vast majority of those interviewed welcomed the decision to unify the Probation Service, believing that 'it was the right thing to do' (Olivia, PSO). The principle of being a unified service was something all could endorse, but the majority of those we spoke to about their reflections on hearing the news of unification found their

enthusiasm was tempered by the scale of the organisational changes they knew would follow. Consequently, how individuals *experienced* and perceived unification was shaped by a range of factors including their personal biographies, their experiences of probation pre-and-post unification, their role within the organisation, and the locality in which they worked. Broader economic and social conditions such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis were also identified as significant influences. For most respondents, there was no significant catalytic moment they could identify that characterised moving to a unified service. Though a whole range of activities to manage the logistics of organisational change would soon commence, most reflected that the date of unification (26 June 2021) came and went with no significant impact as they continued to work alongside the same colleagues, in the same buildings, with the same caseloads. While for others although there were no immediate changes, there was still the realisation that further changes were coming down the line and they were apprehensive about what this would entail.

Although we did not specifically ask about *Transforming Rehabilitation* (TR) its prominence, unprompted, in all interviews made explicit how the legacy of the earlier reform programme undoubtedly shaped many individuals' perceptions and experiences of more recent organisational changes. *Transforming Rehabilitation* was viewed as something that had been *done to* the service against the wishes of the staff tasked with implementing the reforms on the ground. As one participant observed, 'nobody chose this apart from those in a ministerial position' (Matt, SPO). The collective memory of 'the split' often surfaced in emotive language and hostility towards those they saw as responsible for it:

> Chris Grayling, I don't know the man but he became this really, really hated individual because what was the basis of his decision to totally disrupt what felt like a high achieving organisation. (Jane, SPO)

Experiencing TR, and the often-fraught navigation of organisational change it involved, was expressed by some in the language of workplace trauma that, for many, spilt over into their personal/family lives. The reflection of the practitioner below aligns with the assertion by Walker et al. (2019: 113) that the impact of TR on the working practices within probation represented 'a pervasive form of systematic workplace harm' that had and continues to have, an impact on individuals' mental well-being and professional esteem.

> TR is probably one of the most traumatic things I've had to deal with on a day-to-day basis. We talk to people on probation about adverse childhood experiences and traumatic experiences. I would wholeheartedly say that if you took it in the context of it being in work and you took it home, I would actually say we've all collectively had a very traumatic experience in work, and it has not been recognised as that. (Anna, PSO)

The flurry of activity associated with the initial period post-unification – ending CRC contracts, conducting staff/role evaluations and then launching new unified

Probation Service regions – evoked memories of the organisational split brought about by TR. These included feelings of unfairness, and practitioners' lack of agency in the process. Many in our sample reflected on an on-going sense of power-lessness through and beyond unification, whereby they did not feel they had a voice in the transition to the new organisation. Whilst many respondents noted that they were able to discuss concerns with colleagues and immediate line managers, they also reported that they felt disconnected from those at 'the Centre' with decisions made and communicated remotely with what they saw as little consideration for the implications for front-line service delivery.

Capturing the sense of being overwhelmed by the frequency of communications and directives generated during this time, one practitioner considered the messaging being driven from the Centre as 'a noise that I have to put up with and work with. But it's just noise' (James, PO). That most meetings, owing to Covid-19 restrictions, were taking place virtually also added to the challenge many reported in being able to take the time to navigate and digest all of the information being communicated:

> I never get the chance to read anything on there [MS Teams platform] …[as] a case manager you haven't got time to lift your head to look at anything other than what's in your diary that day. It feels like you're firefighting.(Grace, PSO)

Jarring with the perception that unification was intuitively the right step for probation to take, many still harboured frustrations with the organisational upheaval that the TR reforms had entailed and, as with the TR reform programme (which had been implemented without a sufficient proof-of-concept pilot), there was a fear that the changes were once again taking place too quickly. What heightened this anxiety was the concern that probation – in common with many other organisations – was having to adapt to the exceptional delivery arrangements required by the Covid-19 pandemic:

> I just found it confusing, with reunification in the midst of Covid and working from home. I just think the timing couldn't have been worse. They rushed the implementation of TR and – predictably for political reasons – they have rushed the reunification and I am living in the ensuing crisis. (Ian, SPO)

Underpinning many practitioners' anxieties was a residual fear that the new organisation remained vulnerable to political interference. Concerns regarding the feasibility of delivering unification and repairing the harms caused by TR within the planned timeframe were widespread and among our interviewees there was a recognition of the enormity of the challenge in successfully unifying the organisation. The following comment was typical of a number of staff who recalled their initial reaction to the news of unification: 'one of my overriding thoughts then was this is going to be an absolute logistical nightmare to even start unpicking [TR] and trying to bring this back together' (Esme, Senior Manager).

A sense of loss

We found in our previous study (Robinson et al., 2016) that probation staff moving into one of the new CRCs typically described an experience in which a sense of loss was prominent. In the current study, experiences of unification once again prompted reflections on loss. For some staff, unification recalled the extent to which TR had fractured their prior connections and friendships, notwithstanding efforts in many cases to maintain them. Some went further and reflected on how they feared for a loss of credibility as they judged the newly constituted Probation Service would 'import the chaos' (Matt, SPO) from TR.

At the same time, the transition into the Probation Service was a difficult one for CRC legacy staff and many within this group identified the unease they experienced as the new organisation began to bed down. There were many within our CRC legacy staff sample who reflected positively on their experiences of working in the smaller organisational structure of a CRC and what they considered to be the greater flexibility, freedom to innovate, and more direct access to senior managers that this had afforded. What compounded their sense of loss was not only a concern that the unified service would be subject to even more centralised control – which they associated with the way that the NPS had developed since its creation in 2014 – but that the learning and good practices developed by CRCs would be lost in this process too:

> I suppose in one way the CRC had some real flexibility and opportunity to be creative I'd hate that to go just because we're civil service rammed into a narrow kind of avenue. That creativity and freedom to experiment. I'd like to think that there was still the option to do that, but God knows it will be audited to death. (John, SPO)

Meanwhile, staff who had worked in the NPS immediately prior to unification reflected on a perception that the newly constituted Probation Service, was an incorporation by the NPS:

> I came from the NPS so when we split, that's the side I was on. So, the bits of that, that I liked we've kept and the bits that I don't we've kept as well. I feel like we didn't do enough to learn about each other beforehand, both sides, so that we could figure out what were the best parts and amalgamate them together. We've just incorporated everything into the NPS. (Patricia, SPO)

But whilst structures and organisational forms – and the mourning of their loss – was important to staff, the most profound sense of loss people felt related to colleagues, often experienced, leaving the service. A review of the HMPPS workforce data (Ministry of Justice, 2022) helps identify that whilst leaving rates fell during 2020 and 2021 as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, they have returned to pre-pandemic levels and are continuing on an upward trend that was visible between 2017 and 2020. When the research fieldwork commenced in April 2022 the underlying leaving rate for Probation Officers grade staff was at 8.1% from 5.7% in 2017, and for Probation Support Officer grade 12.4% in 2022 from 8.1% in

2017. In many cases respondents felt that the reason that their former colleagues had chosen to leave probation was because they were unwilling to engage with another reform programme or struggled to see themselves and their skills within a reconfigured service. At its most extreme, this sense of loss incited in some interviewees an anger and resentment towards the organisation for not having done more to support, and retain staff in order to avoid the double impact of losing valued colleagues and subsequently then having to take on additional cases:

> Others have just had enough of, you know, the constant pressures of deadlines. I don't feel like I actually do the job I came in to do. My job just seems to be very focussed on process, on paperwork, on arse-covering; that constant fear that if it all goes wrong it's going to land on your doorstep. (Maria, PO)

All those who reflected on the departure of colleagues could understand their reasons for leaving, as they also had concerns about their own capacity to meet the requirements expected of them. A review of probation workforce data (Ministry of Justice, 2022) illustrates how valid these real and immediate concerns around staff capacity were. The data captures, amongst others, that in March 2022, a month before our data collection started, whilst there were 4397 full time equivalent Probation Officers in post this still represented a shortfall of 1762 full time equivalent against the required staffing level of 6158 full time equivalent officers. As staff claimed, and the workforce data supports, the upward trajectory of staff leaving the service in place before and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic underpinned their belief that the service was losing not only skilled staff but also their contribution to a sense of culture and values. This added to the sense of a fractured working environment, in a workforce that craved stability.

Two tribes: A fractured working environment

What, for many, accentuated their sense of loss and compounded feelings of insecurity as unification took hold was the recollection of how fractured the different legacy organisations had felt following the split brought about by Transforming Rehabilitation. For a considerable number of those interviewed, the language and process(es) of unification were believed to have under-estimated the profound challenges of bringing staff from very different organisations together into one common organisational space. The time taken that would be required to weave together different cultural legacies was frequently mentioned. Where practitioners had engaged with the Target Operating Model (TOM) – as a modest number of our sample had – they spoke positively about the vision for the service and of the phased way the new service sought to evolve. Many however also reflected that the reality of bringing together staff groups where some colleagues had worked together previously, whilst others had only known one legacy organisation, and where office spaces were being remodelled to facilitate more harmonised working, meant the early months of the new Probation Service felt like being part of a 'dysfunctional family' (Esme, Senior Manager).

Moreover, it was how many perceived the framing of the process of unification that added to the sense of fracture they experienced. Across our samples of NPS and CRC legacy staff, we found many practitioners who felt it was more apt to conceptualise unification as an NPS 'takeover' entailing the absorption of CRC staff within NPS structures. On an operational and practical level this was routinely identified as problematic as, for many, it underplayed the need to work through and undo the differences that were integral and designed into the separate organisational forms created by TR. From their inception, the CRCs had to deliver to new service expectations, work with existing partners differently, and align with the prevailing structures of new parent companies. The failure to develop a unified IT system nationwide that could accommodate CRC cases also meant that former CRC practitioners continued to hold high caseloads, as unification proceeded, whilst having to adjust to NPS structures. The following quotation from a CRC legacy staff member whose career in probation predated TR helpfully captures the tensions involved for many in making sense of shifts in organisational thinking:

> I don't think I [and others] really appreciated how different our profile of caseloads [had] became, and we've had the freedom of working in a CRC [to be] able to make decisions quite quickly, and effectively, and efficiently. Whereas, NPS colleagues have not, and they've been working through this bureaucracy, and red tape for years. 'We', I mean [from a] legacy CRC perspective, we're coming in with a slightly different head now because we've worked in a different space, more of a commercial space – which I don't agree with. But we have done and so it's different cultures and with those colleagues [who] have never worked in the Trust they've only ever known what they've known, so they can't even go back to what they knew before. (Carol, Senior Manager)

Those whose careers started before TR drew on their institutional memory to help contextualise and frame how challenging and drawn out the task of reunifying a fractured workforce would be and of the need to patiently blend working practices together. At times, the challenging nature of the working environment exacerbated the sense of fracture and in what were uneasy reflections practitioners began to pinpoint how structurally and in terms of working practices there was still considerable work required to create a fully coherent and unified service. Given that the prior structures had bifurcated along the lines of risk, with NPS staff holding responsibility for supervising high-risk cases, and CRCs medium to low risk, the allocation of cases and perceptions of the mixing of cases and equivalence of roles and professional skills was one such sensitive area. At the time of interviews caseload integration had not yet taken place, and this was a source of disquiet among some who had anticipated that unification would bring about more equally distributed caseloads (both in terms of numbers and risk profiles). For instance, in the quote below, Anna a PSO who had previously worked in the NPS, described a feeling of inequity when she compared her current 'high risk' caseload to staff from legacy CRCs working at the same grade:

As a legacy NPS, I'm carrying some really hefty cases and when I compare them to my legacy CRC colleagues, they've got more cases, but they're not as in high severity. I've got a lot of murderers, a lot of paedophile sex offenders, drug dealers, really violent offenders. I've got less cases because they do tend to be a bit more complex. Because it is emotionally you know, I'm being paid the same as them. But I'm not getting the same kind of genre of clients in and because I'm getting these really long term, serious clients, it does take a toll on you. I'm not saying having 60–70 lower risk clients is easier because some of my colleagues do have 60–70 but there is still that kind of legacy CRC can't take sex offenders and I'm thinking well why because they have had the same training as me, so it is creating some sort of a divide. (Anna, PSO)

But it is within the above context that the framing of unification as a 'takeover' cut even deeper for many. The majority of legacy CRC staff interviewed considered that the idea of "failed CRCs" had become a normalised part of everyday discourse, which in turn impacted upon their sense of professional esteem. Representative of many from our legacy CRC cohort, the two quotes below not only capture the subtle and enduring experiences of fracture, but also of how it is rooted in judgements of poor practice:

A year down the line, we're now in that [post-unification] phase and there is a culture clash, and you can see it daily. It's nothing nasty and it's not an horrendous culture clash, but there is…for me, from a CRC point of view, 'NPS good, CRC bad', [an assumption] that NPS deliver good, solid, risk management and the CRC weren't good at that. (Eric, PSO)

It was the simple things, like your lanyard. At the point of unification, obviously you couldn't have anything with CRC on because I think it was a dirty word at that point…all the legacy CRC staff got new lanyards, and they weren't great and they just kept falling off. The legacy NPS staff all had their own 'National Probation Service' [lanyards] so they kept them. I know it's something quite simple, but that was still an identity and a badge, what organisation you previously worked for. (Esme, Senior Manager)

Beyond the formal vision being created for a new unified service, and how to reach that point, written into the Target Operating Model and official communications, there were also informal and local level discussions taking place that sought to sensitively work through emotive processes of trying to harmonise a fractured workforce. The extract below highlights the challenge of aligning the working practices of staff in two different organisational forms:

Some of my best friends, people I joined up together with years ago, had no choice but to work in the CRC. And it is just that association with failure. But it is not them or anyone, it is [that] the system was wrong. No one wants to be connected to something that has been perceived as failing when they are working their socks off and think they are doing the right things. (Carol, Senior Manager)

The unsettled working conditions – as the service was still coming to terms with a post-Covid-19 environment and staffing capacity issues – worked against the full realisation of the opportunities presented by unification. Sirdifield et al.'s (2022) research captured the adaptability and resilience of probation staff to respond to the challenges of operating during the pandemic but also documented the difficulties of using remote supervision to build rapport and to engage in open and honest dialogue concerning individual's needs and circumstances. So it is within our sample that whilst the bulk of respondents reported an appetite and intent to shape new organisational cultures, many found it was difficult if not impossible to look beyond the immediate challenges of organisational churn.

> For me reunification should've opened up new lines of communication with new people, getting to know their experiences, being able to share mine…forming those new friendships and work relationships within such a high-intensity role that is emotionally demanding and is demanding of your time, it's so important to have an office environment that feels healthy and conducive to supporting people's emotional wellbeing. I think there are definite steps, moving forwards and there needed to be. (Beverly, PO)

A sense of crisis? Underpaid and overstretched

The interviews, which took place between April and August 2022, found the majority of staff at all levels and across the region feeling unsettled, even overwhelmed, by the frantic nature of the working environment they were operating within. The language of *crisis* was routinely used to characterise the volatility and uncertainty surrounding many aspects of working within the Probation Service and their lack of confidence that things would soon improve. Importantly though, this multifaceted sense of crisis was considered to be a sector wide phenomenon, not one confined to specific offices or indeed to the case study region. What seemingly underpinned all layers of crisis was the feeling many had that the occupational culture of the service was being eroded by the relentless nature of the workload demands placed on staff at all levels. Many respondents reported regularly working late at night and on weekends, which was having a negative effect on their work/life balance. This 'spill over' of probation work into practitioner's family lives is of course not a new phenomenon and has been documented by Westaby et al. (2016). Feelings of stress, overwork, and anxiety were recurring themes with interviewees openly discussing the impact on their mental health and wellbeing:

> I couldn't work those long hours anymore. Nobody asked me to work those long hours but the majority of [us] probation staff are caring and conscientious. With that volume of high cases that you've got and the work that needs doing, and all the changes that came with it at once, it was too overwhelming. It just wasn't manageable. (Beverly, PO)

In addition to the individual challenges most practitioners reported in managing their workloads there were shared anxieties that added to feelings of unsettlement. The

volatility created by colleagues' absences through sickness and stress meant teams routinely had to adapt, move cases around, and make sense of shifts in operational capacity in ways that added to a cumulative sense of unmanageability:

> It's so tense at the moment, it's really on breaking point. The ripple effect, in an office where you've got 15 POs, if two resign because they can get a better job with less stress elsewhere and then you reallocate the caseload. You reallocate the caseload, then two go off sick because they've got too much workload. All of a sudden, you've got 10 POs for 15 POs' work, things don't get done, jobs start piling up. It's just insane. That feels like where we are at the moment, just a very hard-pressed public service. (Ian, SPO)

The challenging nature of their immediate working environment, coupled with increased levels of risk and adverse working conditions, made many reflect on their terms of employment and conditions, and their longer-term futures in the service. The need for improving salary and pay scales was a powerful feature in a number of our interviews;

> I've been at the top of my band for over twenty years now, so I've been getting poorer and poorer. To be in a professional job and not being able to be in a position to pay your bills and keep everything paid that you need to pay for and not having any disposable income, that's disappointing. (Grace, PSO)

In over a quarter of the interviews with frontline staff, respondents compared their pay and conditions unfavourably with other sectors (including retail), roles which they perceived as carrying far lower levels of risk and responsibility. Many respondents explicitly cited this as the reason they or a close colleague was considering their future in the organisation. Individual practitioners' enduring sense of commitment and loyalty to their role was being tested by what some saw as overbearing pressure to manage risk, coupled with the fear of being exposed if people whom they supervised committed a Serious Further Offence.

Recruitment and retention

The need to be patient, and to retain (or build) confidence, came through most vividly in respondents' reflections on current staffing capacity and the steps being taken to address this. Within these reflections we saw contrasts in the judgements being made about the pace and impact of the recruitment efforts in place to address the shortfalls in staffing numbers. The volatility of the environment and the very real prospect of colleagues leaving on short or permanent absences was accepted by the majority of our interviewees as a challenge for them and their professional practice. But they could also see the challenges in the conditions newer staff into the organisation would experience.

For more experienced staff with a service history that predated TR, they had a vivid memory of a period in probation's history when the pressures were not as

relentless. They also had a counterpoint to the present and their own more positive learning and mentoring relationships that had been so crucial in their professional development. They were concerned that their new colleagues – and those undertaking the Probation Qualification in Probation (PQiP) programme in particular – were not benefitting from such conditions. This was compounded by the sheer numbers of those in training, reflecting a commitment to recruit 2500 trainee probation officers between 2020 and 2022 to support delivery of the Target Operating Model (HMPPS, 2020: 4). On occasion, the influx of trainees into the organisation was viewed more as a burden by some rather than providing relief to the existing workforce. As one respondent observed:

> We all really want those new staff to do well, but also you're mindful that you are only giving them 50% of what they need because you're so busy yourself. (Olivia, PSO)

The following comment was typical of concerns expressed frequently about the robustness of the training and mentoring recent and current PQiP trainees new to the service had received. Shaped in large part by the impact of Covid-19 restrictions within the workplace and by on-going staffing capacity concerns within the service, the perceived gradual (and on-going) denial of routine opportunities for face-to-face mentoring and supervision were cited as compromising the opportunities to nurture rounded practitioners. The impact of Covid-19 on training had accentuated the increased use of online training and had limited the scope for dedicated one-to-one supervision and review of case work that they reflected had been so crucial to the development of their confidence and professional practice:

> I don't think [PQiPs] are where they need to be. With the best will in the world, from all that I've seen, that training programme is not as effective as the one that we all did. There isn't the intensity. There isn't the exposure. There isn't the support. There isn't the face-to-face contact enough for training. It does feel like the quality of the staff that come out now aren't necessarily where you'd like to see them at that point. I do think that that has been a kind of dumbing down in the training really. (Amy, SPO)

For the bulk of practitioners still in their first two years of service, Covid-19 restrictions had impacted upon their recent employment and study experiences. Hybrid working practices were denying them crucial informal learning opportunities, as they began their career in probation, to prepare for case management and the immediate demands of the role. Across a number of offices, in ways consistent with Dominey et al.'s (2021) research we found staff reported struggles not only in terms of remote working limiting the richness of their supervision practice(s), but also in terms of providing formal and informal mentoring opportunities for PQiPs. This caused some to worry about how quickly those new to the organisation were moving into full caseloads and complex case management and of the potential impacts on longer-term retention of newly qualified staff:

[For PQiPs] it is at least six months before you see any payback, and [I know] it sounds really transactional, but the learners need a really steady entry in, they need to be supported and it takes a lot of support. But because of where we are at, we are pulling back from some of the things we offered previously such as mentoring arrangements, et cetera. My fear is that we may get a group coming in, very positive, engaged, real sense of vocation and wanting to do this work, but how quickly will they be battered down because of what they are coming into and how resilient [will they be]? (Mary, Senior Manager)

While the recruitment of staff to fill vacancies, and the investment of funding to support this, was viewed as necessary, important, and welcome respondents saw people take time away from work through sickness, and early career practitioners who reported that the reality of the role was very different from their expectations. This reinforced, for many in our sample, concerns about retention, and the need to do more on working conditions for those in probation as much as about initial recruitment.

Optimism, pessimism, and loyalty

A pervasive view captured in our first sweep of research interviews with practitioners in our case study region was that unification was a necessary, but painful, process for the service (and those working within it). Much like the need to harmonise and weave together two or more contrasting organisational cultures, and to mediate the on-going consequences of adapting to changed working conditions in a time beyond Covid-19 – both briefly captured here – it was possible for our interviewees to see opportunities and threats in all aspects of the future development of the service. The challenging pace, direction, experience, and consequences of the latest organisational changes affecting probation – its unification – were generally experienced as turbulent and unsettling. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that our respondents found the situation challenging.

However, when our interviewees were asked about their optimism for the service in the longer-term, we observed a contrast between present concerns and future hopes. At the basic level, many respondents recognised the sheer scale of the enterprise:

I do think that years down the line, we will look back and say, "God, what did we live through? How did we get back to this point?" I've a very realistic understanding that it will take years to achieve and that the path to that will be quite painful. (Lauren, PO)

We asked all participants to rate how optimistic they felt about the future of the Probation Service, with a score of 10 indicating the highest level of optimism. The average score for our sample was 6 with half of our respondents scoring 7 or more on this question. The following quote, offering positive but measured views on the efforts being made to address staff capacity, resonated with the thoughts of many:

I'm at a 7, so I'm feeling optimistic that it will be better [but] I'm not convinced we're going to get there in the timeframe that we need to. If you'd have asked me September I'd have been, 10, it's going to be great, all these staff are going to come in and it's going to change the world. Now [in June] the reality is it's going to take two, three, four years until we really see that. (Valerie, Senior Manager)

Fourteen per cent of the sample scored 4 or lower. Unlike the findings of the HM Inspectorate of Probation report (2021) that found that levels of positivity in terms of working for probation decreased according to length of service, there was no obvious correlation among respondents in our study in terms of how optimistic they were in terms of either their length of service, role, legacy organisation or geographical location.

In his study of probation staff following the TR reforms, Tidmarsh (2022: 180) found that probation practitioners tended to identify more with probation as a profession rather than the organisation within which it was located and that a 'commitment to an offender-centric ideology of service endured throughout organizational change'. Similarly, those interviewed in our study routinely expressed a strong sense of duty of care, both to the people they supervise and colleagues they work alongside.

I mean the heart is there, as cheesy as that sounds. I think if you work here, you are not here for the money, are you? Staff are here for the right reasons and that is the foundation that you need. The people here, they want to help people, and that is what we do. (Becky, PSO)

The resolve expressed by many probation staff to persist, despite the considerable day-to-day challenges, emerged even more strongly when we asked respondents to rate how loyal they felt to the Probation Service (with 10 being very loyal). 72% of those interviewed scored 7 or above with the mean score for the sample of 7.4. The below views were not uncommon:

I'm really proud of working for the Probation Service. I would be proud if I was a probation officer, if I was an SPO and I'm proud of where I am now... I do feel really loyal to it. (Eric, Senior Manager)

When probed further regarding what the interviewees felt loyal to, staff tended to report their loyalty being to the values of probation, to colleagues, and to the people they supervise. Similar to the 'guardians' we observed in our earlier study (Burke et al., 2017), many respondents framed this in terms of an enduring commitment to probation and the values that underpinned such work

You know that whatever you do in your day, no matter what role you're in, is contributing to making things better for [the most vulnerable in society]. Why wouldn't you want to do that, why wouldn't you want to help those that are less advantaged than yourself? That's what I'm loyal to. (Diane, PO)

My loyalty lies to my colleagues and my staff and the legacy of what my probation roots were. My loyalty lies to those offenders who are in the community, who are part of a bigger system and who are trying to move forward with their lives. (Ian, Senior Manager)

The enduring sense of optimism and loyalty presented by respondents may appear somewhat paradoxical in the face of the challenges they were experiencing but it may also be reflective of the need to find positives in such difficult circumstances in order to cope with the immediate challenges they faced.

Conclusion

While welcoming the decision to unify probation services, at the time of the government's announcement, the Chief Inspector of Probation noted some of the underlying problems impacting service delivery and warned that there would be no magic bullet for the deep underlying problems within probation (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). The findings presented in this article would concur with this view. Our respondents understood themselves to be on a long, challenging journey that would not be easily completed. Amongst other things, there were concerns about staffing levels – including recruitment, retention, and professional development – and the difficulties of overcoming the emotional and logistical legacies of Covid-19 continue to present real challenges to the ability of the service to support, supervise, and rehabilitate the people on probation, and probation practitioners' confidence in it to do so. These issues, and concerns, are not unique to our case study area. HMI Probation has stated that nationally probation continues be an organisation that is 'struggling with major staffing issues, with under-trained officials coping with an unmanageable workload' (Lowbridge, 2023). In this respect our findings support the assertion that probation is a sector undergoing a necessarily lengthy and complex process of restructuring but that it does so as 'a post-traumatic organisation' (Robinson, 2022) still contending with the harms of the hasty implementation and subsequent systemic flaws of the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reform programme as well as a global pandemic.

Efforts are being made to address the staffing gaps within probation services with the stated policy ambitions to increase recruitment and direct resources to frontline services being supported by the allocation of an additional £155 million through the Workforce Programme (HM Prison & Probation Service, 2020). However, Johal and Davies (2022: 9) caution that this injection 'may not be sufficient given the competition from other public sector employers...as well as the pressure from staffing groups to increase pay in line with high levels of inflation'. Nonetheless, it does evidence a recognition by HMPPS leaders of the concerns expressed by those in our sample, regarding staff numbers and workload. At the same time, the post-CRC/ NPS dynamics that we have presented here suggest that a year on from unification, much work was still needed to build an 'inclusive culture based upon shared probation values, mutual respect, manageable workloads and blended caseloads, space

for reflective learning, and meaningful line management' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021: 18).

Our previous research (see Burke et al., 2017) showed how the systemic and structural failures that have destabilised probation services in recent years had created cleavages within probation service occupational cultures that stretched the resilience of a durable occupational probation identity located within an ideology of service and an abiding sense of being part of an 'honourable profession' (Worrall, 2015, 2016). The findings from our first sweep of interviews suggests that many probation practitioners continue to hold onto values and ideals that align with (part or all of) what might be understood as classic probation values, and staff use these to maintain resilience and commitment to moving forwards notwithstanding the challenges faced. This is despite probation being in a state of flux and potentially culturally transformed by the large numbers of new staff entering the organisation whose organisational memories do not pre-date the organisational changes brought about by *Transforming Rehabilitation* and the subsequent unification of probation. It remains to be seen what will emerge from these heterogeneous experiences, cultures, ideas – and structural changes – and how that will affect probation over the coming months and years. However, but the extent to which those responsible are able to knit and renew organisational working cultures within the unified service will undoubtedly be crucial in determining whether or not the aspirations of the reform programme are achieved.

Ultimately, as Tidmarsh and Marder (2021: 23) note 'probation practice is at its best when delivered by reflexive, emotionally literate practitioners, guided by explicit values that inform ethical decision-making'. All too often the voices of practitioners have been ignored in past policy discourses and some of those interviewed believed that this continues to be the case. This article and the research study upon which it is drawn are in this respect a modest attempt to redress this imbalance.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iDs

Matthew Millings https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1870-9435
Lol Burke https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3335-9916

Harry Annison ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6042-038X
Gwen Robinson ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1207-0578

Notes

1. *Rehabilitating Probation: Rebuilding culture, identity and legitimacy in a reformed public service, is* a three-year (2022–2024) ESRC funded project that aims to examine the implementation, experiences and consequences of a significant and unprecedented programme of public service reform that has brought formerly outsourced probation services back into the public sector.
2. The research project runs from 2022 until 2024 and we will conduct three sweeps of interviews with staff in the case study region at annual interviews thereby enabling us to build up a picture of staff experiences of the dynamics of unification over time.

References

Burke L, Millings M and Robinson G (2017) Probation migration(s): examining occupational culture in a turbulent field. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 17(2): 192–208.

Dominey J, Coley D, Ellis Devitt K, et al. (2021) Putting a face to a name: telephone contact as part of a blended approach to probation supervision. *Probation Journal* 68(4): 394–410.

Grierson J (2020) Probation services to return to public control after Grayling disasters. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/11/probation-services-to-return-to-public-control-after-grayling-disasters#:~:text=Probation%20services%20to%20return%20to%20public%20control%20after%20Grayling%20disasters,-This%20article%20is&text=Probation%20services%20in%20England%20and,Chris%20Grayling's%20disastrous%20privatisation%20changes (accessed 1 February 2023).

HM Inspectorate of Probation (2019) *Report of the Chief Inspector of Probation*. Manchester: HMIP. Available at https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2019/03/HMI-Probation-Chief-Inspectors-Report.pdf (accessed 8 February 2023)

HM Inspectorate of Probation (2021) *The Views of Frontline Probation Staff about Unification: A Survey by HM Inspectorate of Probation*. Manchester: HMIP. https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2022/02/Probation-Staff-Survey-2021-report-v1.0.pdf (accessed 8 January 2023).

HM Inspectorate of Probation (2022) Chronic staff shortages severely hampering Probation Service. https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/media/press-releases/2022/05/jsc-statement/ (accessed 8 January 2023).

HMPPS (2020) *Probation Workforce Strategy*. London: HMSO.

House of Commons Select Committee (2018) Transforming rehabilitation ninth report of session 2017–19. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmjust/482/482.pdf (accessed 8 January 2023).

Johal R and Davies N (2022) Reunification of probation services. Institute for Government. IFG Insight (August) https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/probation-case-study.pdf (accessed 8 January 2023).

Lowbridge C (2023) Killamarsh murders: Probation failings over killer Damien Bendall. BBC. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-64290599 (accessed 1 February 2023).

Millings M, Burke L and Robinson G (2019) Lost in transition? The personal and professional challenges for probation leaders engaged in delivering public sector reform. *Probation Journal* 66(1): 60–76.

Ministry of Justice (2022) Her Majesty's prison and probation service workforce quarterly: March 2022. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/her-majestys-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterlymarch-2022/her-majestys-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-march-2022 (accessed 1 August 2022).

National Audit Office (2019) *Transforming Rehabilitation: Progress Review.* London: NAO. Available at https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/transforming-rehabilitation-progress-review/ (accessed 8 February 2023)

Phillips J, Westaby C, Ainslie S, et al. (2021) I don't like this job in my front room': practising probation in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Probation Journal* 68(4): 426–443.

Robinson G (2021) Rehabilitating probation: strategies for re-legitimation after policy failure. *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* 60: 151–166.

Robinson G (2022) Can probation be rehabilitated? *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice.* Online version before inclusion in publication. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/hojo.12504 (accessed 8 January 2023).

Robinson G, Burke L and Millings M (2016) Criminal justice identities in transition: the case of devolved probation services in England and Wales. *British Journal of Criminology* 56(1): 161–178.

Sirdifield C, Nichols H and Mullen P (2022) Probation and COVID-19: lessons to improve health-related practice. *Probation Journal* 69(2): 216–234.

Tidmarsh M (2020) The probation service in England and Wales': a decade of radical change or more of the same? *European Journal of Probation* 12: 129–146.

Tidmarsh M (2022) Professional legitimacy, identity, and practice: towards a sociology of professionalism in probation. *British Journal of Criminology* 62(1): 165–183.

Tidmarsh M and Marder I (2021) Beyond marketisation: towards a relational future of professionalism in probation after transforming rehabilitation. *British Journal of Community Justice* 17(2): 22–45.

Walker S, Annison J and Beckett S (2019) Transforming rehabilitation: the impact of austerity and privatisation on day-to-day cultures and working practices in 'probation'. *Probation Journal* 66: 113–130.

Westaby C, Phillips J and Fowler A (2016) Spillover and work-family conflict in probation practice: managing the boundary between work and home life. *European Journal of Probation* 8(3): 113–127.

Worrall A (2015) Grace under pressure: the role of courage in the future of probation work. *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* 54: 508–520.

Worrall A (2016) Probation in the genes?: personal reflections on the fortunes and misfortunes of an honourable profession. In: Vanstone M and Priestley P (eds.) *Probation and Politics: Academic Reflections from Former Practitioners.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 349–365.