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Indifference, resistance, possibility: Probation staff perspectives on the introduction of professional registration

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Abstract

Rehabilitating Probation is a three-year research project (2022–2025), exploring the most recent iteration of probation reform in England and Wales. This article takes as its focus the responses from interviews with a mixed sample of probation staff in one case study region ($n = 56$) to questions they were asked about their knowledge of the Professional Register and what implications they felt it would have for their careers. Our sweep of interviews, running from March 2024 through to September 2024, captures the views of staff in the months leading up to the formal establishment of the Professional Registration policy framework that set out the requirements and guidance for probation staff around professional registration, probation professional registration standards, and loss of authority to practice. Our findings suggest that although some staff in our sample expressed a cautious support for professional registration, there was also a high level of indifference – and in some cases resistance – among those interviewed suggesting a need to articulate more clearly what the purpose of Professional Registration is and what its implementation means for those working within the Probation Service.

Keywords

Registration, regulation, professionalism, accountability

Introduction

Although professional registration (hereafter PR) is a recent development within probation it is well established in other sectors – such as health and social work. Professional registration, it is hoped, will provide probation staff ‘with a clear set of professional standards and a commitment from the employer, HMPPS, to provide continuous professional development’ (Flynn and Hugo-Lake 2024:8). The Probation Institute has been an advocate for registration claiming that ‘In our view no occupation can truly be described as a profession without regulation of entry and progression’ (Probation Institute 2020). In a survey into the views of a group of probation stakeholders ($n = 43$), undertaken on behalf of the Probation Institute (Cognito Development Projects 2021) most respondents were supportive of regulation, believing it would enhance the professional status and public profile of probation work. Underpinning this was the perception that the status of probation as a profession had been eroded over time in comparison to other related occupations, particularly social work. Others felt that registration could bring about greater accountability, believing that the existing checks and balances on poor probation practice were insufficient. The concerns of those participants who were less supportive of registration mainly centred on what they saw as merely adding another level of bureaucracy to their work, with few discernible benefits. The report argued for the establishment of an independent body to set practice standards and determine role parameters. This was rejected by the Ministry of Justice who instead decided to develop an internal system of registration as part of the HMPPS Workforce Programme. The register would be ‘digitally integrated and hold details of the

qualification status of probation qualified staff in core roles, information regarding their Continuing Professional Development, alongside probation professional standards' (HM Prison & Probation Service 2023:11).

In April 2023, an interim Professional Registration policy was launched by the Ministry of Justice, and a Policy Framework was subsequently published in September 2024 that set out the requirements and guidance for probation qualified staff around professional registration, probation professional registration standards, and loss of authority to practice. The policy outlines the purpose of the register as 'to recognise the competence and commitment of probation qualified staff to high standards of professionalism and provides assurance to HMPPS, government and our stakeholders and partners that those individuals authorised to assess and manage the risk of people on probation have the right qualifications, knowledge and skills to do so' (HM Prison & Probation Service 2024:4). It is possible to identify two main drivers in the move towards PR, notably the need to increase confidence and enhance professionalism. The need to *provide assurance* can be seen as echoing a belief that there has been a loss of confidence in probation especially among sentencers manifesting in the decline in the use of community sentences (Centre for Justice Innovation 2019). As Robinson et al. (2023) observe, although *confidence* is a social construct with no fixed or objective meaning, it regularly features in policy documents and perhaps most explicitly in the consultation on the future of probation services in England and Wales entitled *Strengthening Probation, Building Confidence* (Ministry of Justice 2018). The authors also note though that discussions of and attempts to measure confidence in criminal justice agents have mainly focussed on external audiences with a particular emphasis on the public as consumers of services with little attention paid to confidence of those front-line staff tasked with delivering such services.

'Professionalism' is clearly another main driver behind Probation professional registration which is perhaps understandable after the period of instability brought about by the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms. Although 'professionalism' is a contested term it is 'an attractive prospect for an occupation to be considered a profession and for occupational workers to be identified as professionals' (Evetts, 2003:396). Indeed, it has been argued that the unification of the service provided an opportunity to refocus on the professional status of practitioners following a succession of 'top down' reforms to its organisational structure (Tidmarsh 2022a:4). Registered practitioners must adhere to six Probation Professional Registration Standards¹ and authorisation to practice can be withdrawn or suspended 'if the individual's professional and/or personal conduct calls into question their suitability and/or fitness to carry out the relevant statutory functions' (Ministry of Justice 2024:6). It is the responsibility of Regional Probation Directors to ensure that staff in their regions are aware of and comply with the Professional Registration policy.

Methodology

The research on which this article is based was undertaken as part of a wider study exploring the reconstitution of probation services following the decision in 2020 to

unify the public and private elements of probation delivery in England and Wales. The three-year *Rehabilitating Probation* project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and it seeks to explore a series of questions related to the challenges of reuniting a fractured workforce following a period of extensive reform (Annison et al., 2023; Millings et al., 2023, 2025; Robinson et al., 2023). In this contribution to the special issue on professional registration we draw specifically on interviews conducted between March 2024 and September 2024 in the third of three sweeps of interviews in a case study probation region. We asked two targeted questions - amongst a range of other questions which explored aspects of practice, identity and organisational change - to gauge the impact and reach of the HMPPS-led efforts to introduce and raise practitioner awareness of the Professional Register.

1. The Probation Professional Register was launched last year. What is your understanding of the register?
2. From what you know about the Professional Register what do you see are the implications for you, your career, and your practice?

The data we draw upon in this research includes interviews with a total of 56 staff in our case study area. Our case study is typical of the 12 probation regions in that it covers a large geographical area, including densely populated metropolitan areas, smaller towns, and more rural scarcely populated areas. In line with University and National Research Council ethical approvals, all interviews were recorded and transcribed and, in this article, we have grouped respondents into five distinctive groups using pseudonyms. The groups are senior managers² (SMs) $n = 10$; Heads of Probation Delivery Units (PDU Leads) $n = 7$; senior probation officers (SPOs) $n = 12$; probation officers (POs) $n = 18$; and probation service officers (PSOs) $n = 10$. Staff were identified through purposeful sampling according to their role within the organisation, gender, and their probation experience prior to unification. Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or via Microsoft Teams before being transcribed and coded thematically using NVivo. In the following section we present the main themes pertaining to participants' views regarding registration.

Lack of knowledge and understanding of professional registration

Professional registration is mandatory for all roles where there is a legal requirement to have a probation officer qualification. Probation service officers are currently not subject to the policy framework for registration although they may be included at a later date (HM Prison & Probation Service 2024). A handful ($n = 5$) of interviewees reported knowing nothing at all about the Professional Register with 4 of this group being PSO grade (to whom registration requirements currently do not apply). However, whilst the vast majority of our participants reported having some awareness of PR, many reported a limited amount of knowledge of the rationale and underpinning aims of the register. This included its consequences for them as practitioners or managers.

In some cases (n = 9) respondents reported that they had heard of PR and had attended a briefing session but still considered their knowledge limited and indicated little appetite at this point to learn more about the Register. For a larger group of respondents (n = 31) their views on PR were indifferent. They could recall the messaging about PR and had a sense of the ambition involved but were uncertain about how PR would impact upon them. The below comments from an SPO and PO are representative of the views expressed within this group:

'I've heard of it [but] I don't think it landed very well. I know I'm qualified, so my name should be on there with my qualification, [and] I've got a couple of PSOs doing the Vocational Qualification, and I think that's part of it. But if you ask me to answer in detail what it is, I couldn't.' (Katherine, SPO)

'It's not really been talked about that much in the office, to be honest. I think people saw it as a bit of an administrative task in terms of having that updated on their staff record. [Administration for administrations sake is what we do in probation] it reminded me when I qualified, I was asked for my certificates the very next week, and I was like, to my manager, "You've been with me the whole programme. You met with my Practice Assessor so many times to say that I've completed everything." But they still needed to see check' (Alison, PO)

Middle managers, and PDU leads especially, have a key role in both implementing and championing new policy initiatives and in helping staff to make sense of the changes in conditions happening around them. However, a thematic review of the SPO role (HM Inspectorate of Probation 2024) has highlighted excessive workloads, a lack of clarity about the role, and the amount of non-operational activity that is undertaken by this group of staff. The experiences of senior managers trying to make sense of the implications of PR and encountering staff uncertainty about the processes and underpinning rationale involved were repeated through several interviews. Even where senior managers supported the principle of PR there was acknowledgement that the process – of *'constantly chasing people [for their qualifications] and the organisation saying 'unless you provide them now, it's a disciplinary'* (Nora, SM) – was increasingly being interpreted as somewhat of a tick-box exercise where staff uploaded their certificates with little understanding of why they were doing this and what the benefits could be. Senior managers, subsequently, identified how the operationalisation of PR was increasingly being problematised by staff as a bureaucratic process and compromising practitioner's willingness to build their knowledge and understanding of PR.

'on a personal level, I am very supportive, but I don't think we've sold that message, yet, across the organisation. You've just got a lot of people huffing and puffing about trying to find certificates and not yet seeing [any benefit], Well what's the advantage, even when I do upload it onto the system, then what?' (Rowan, SM)

'Yeah, it's on the radar, but not really, not in a negative way, only people going, "Oh, God, I can't find my certificate..." but no, it has not caused any noise at all.' (Ashley, SM)

As part of the registration process staff are required to provide copies of their qualifications and this information is held on a Single Operating Platform (SOP). Whilst perhaps unsurprisingly more recently qualified staff found it more straightforward to provide their qualification, a small handful of longer in-service staff (n = 5) reported struggling to locate their certificates and having to pay for new copies to be issued. They experienced the push to evidence their credentials to practice as more unsettling. The below quote from a PDU Lead echoes the views of those who explicitly problematised their experience of completing the administrative processes for PR.

'you're told you have to prove your qualifications, so I was up in the attic, I found one certificate, not the other, and was told, "We need evidence that you've got your diploma or NVQ,". Bloody hell, it was 20 years ago. I've had kids, got married and moved house three times. Eventually, after a lot of wrangling, they sent me this really condescending letter, saying, 'In spite of you not being able to find your certificate, we accept that you are a qualified probation officer, and you're fit to practice.' I was laughing my head off. So that was the hoo-ha around that. I don't think I was the only one who had to go through that.' (Carol, PDU Lead)

Carol's experience reflects the frustration of having to prove her professional credentials to what she perceived to be a faceless employer and captures what for some is a disconnect between their 'deeply embedded dispositions...[that] guide and underpin their everyday practice' (Grant 2016: 750) with the inflexibility of civil service structures and the increased bureaucracy they were facing. In a recent survey conducted by HM Inspectorate of Probation (2024) only nine per cent of sentence management SPOs believed that policy makers and senior managers understood the impact of their decisions on frontline practitioners. A preoccupation with process was described by one respondent in our study as a diversion from what was a 'service in crisis', which was 'reliant on its processes to 'fill the gaps' (Victoria, SPO).

Making sense of the indifference towards professional registration

The prevailing theme of managers and staff reporting a lack of knowledge and understanding about PR needs to be placed in context. Within the data we can see, firstly, the concern many voiced about the timing of the rolling out of PR within the challenging work setting in which all were operating (Millings et al. 2023, Tidmarsh 2023) and secondly, the lack of clear championing and drive for PR at key points throughout the organisational hierarchy within the probation service.

A series of reports published by HM Inspectorate, since unification in June 2021, capture the difficulty of working within a sector that is having to contend with high workloads and enduring challenges in recruiting and retaining staff. Over half the sample identified that this challenging climate had contributed to the failure to sufficiently land PR amongst the staff group and that workload demands and the feeling of being overwhelmed by information militated against finding the time to read and consume messages about the policy.

That managers and staff in our research vocalised unease in changes to their organisational and practice setting is not a new phenomenon and speaks to the enduring and long-standing concerns practitioners in the field have reported. Robinson and Burnett (2007: 332) contend that for probation staff experiencing processes of restructuring and adapting to service transformation has long been 'a defining characteristic of their professional existence'. The dynamic challenges for probation professionals in balancing the experiences (and consequences) of organisational change with the unrelenting pressures to deliver service provision to those they supervise has been vividly captured in rounds of research that has followed (see Phillips et al. 2016, Robinson et al. 2016). In the most recent manifest challenge for the probation service, some in the sample (n = 6) identified the acute impact of the 'Probation Reset'³ programme and the repercussions of the roll-out of the early release schemes to alleviate pressures within prisons at this time, meaning that there was limited capacity to engage with the messaging and requirements of the Professional Register. The following views of a PDU Lead and senior manager capture this sense.

'[Professional Registration has] come along at the same time as obviously Probation Reset, prison capacity issues, and I think it has just been lost in that...it's become about sending out lists of people who have not uploaded their professional qualification on to SOP, unfortunately, and that's how it feels, at this moment in time, it just hasn't been the right time for this' (Esme, PDU head)

'Worryingly it feels tokenistic, at this stage. People have been busy trying to evidence their professional qualification and that's the energy it's consumed, at this moment in time. I think it feels, to me, it's another thing that people need to do at a time when they trying to hold things together as opposed to something that is seen as a valued development' (Mary, SM)

What had further compounded the nature of staff engagement with PR was the perception that the championing and explicit support for PR among leaders within the organisation – that is, RPDs, senior managers, PDU/Team Leads – had been limited. By their own admission the senior managers in our sample identified how their own lack of clear knowledge about PR had hindered their capacity to proactively work to promote PR. This in some cases was indicative of their own indifference towards PR - 'I think it will provide safeguards but I don't think it's going to be a game-changer particularly' (Micah, SM) and 'I hear lots of enthusiasm from London, but I've not heard a single person talk about it in a positive or a negative way'

(Alex, SM). Much like the wider staff group, senior managers highlighted concerns with the timing and administrative-heavy focus of the rolling out of PR reported more broadly.

'My understanding of that initiative is that it is poorly thought through and ill-conceived. I did go to a briefing on it...It didn't seem to have any credibility. It created a load of work for me as a manager both individually and for my team, and it didn't seem to be any use.' (Ian, SPO)

The use of the word credibility here resonated with concerns expressed by others - managers and staff alike - around who would 'own' the Register and whether this would sit within, or beyond the Probation Service. When identifying examples from other sectors for maintaining a register – social work and nursing were often cited by our respondents in this respect – the importance of independence was regularly highlighted. The lack of clarity and certainty in the minds of staff about who would hold and administer a probation register had a clear impact in terms the indifference some reported as it shaped their sense the development of professional registration was happening to, rather than with them - in ways that reinforce the sense that Robinson et al. (2017 and 2023) claim can see practitioners as the forgotten constituent population in negotiations of legitimacy. This anxiety is evident too in the concerns raised by the Probation Institute that there needs to be a distinction between the professional body and the regulatory function (Cognito Development Projects 2021: 10). Although PR currently sits firmly with the Ministry of Justice, the policy outlines the intention to establish an independent panel of external members to provide oversight and support the implementation of the policy framework (Ministry of Justice 2024: 2).

The concerns senior managers reported extended beyond their own uncertainty around the logistics and ambitions of PR, to a much deeper concern with their assessments of the health of the service to endure further upheaval and in its capacity to trigger potentially divisive discussions about practitioner's levels of professionalism. Indeed, such was the level of concern about the fragility of the service that it compelled some to start to *resist* the push to implement PR. The two quotes below, from a senior manager and a recently qualified PO highlight the potential sensitivities – and fears of creating divisiveness - involved when trying to distinguish between staff groups.

'I worry about having a two-tier approach. I worry about PSOs, case admin, business managers, everybody else feeling like they're not important, because they're not on the register. Our people who previously worked in the CRC, had to provide all of that stuff in order to be eligible to join the Probation Service, which made them feel awful, at the time, as if they weren't legitimately doing the job for the last 20 years. [Now, a couple of years since unification] they were asked to produce them again...they feel, "You've already asked me to prove once whether I'm worthy enough to be here, and now you're asking me again." And that's not okay, is it?' (Alice, SM)

'we have some PSOs in our office who are absolutely fantastic and why should they be discriminated against from a capability aspect just because they don't have a tick in the

box of the qualification? I've got PSOs who I would default to over a PO in our office depending on the question that was being asked. So there are people in our office who don't have that qualification who are just as competent, if not more competent' (Lily, PO)

The sense, captured in the above two quotes, that the probation workforce may feel especially vulnerable to changes in policy that could impact upon the professional standing of practitioners has been a consistent theme in our research since fieldwork commenced in 2022. Both quotes highlight the significance of the language and tone of policy changes as they are introduced and of the need to ensure inclusivity and support for all those who may be affected. Both participants note the very real prospect for creating uncertainty and antagonism if the case for making change is not clearly articulated and it is noticeable how the *legacy* impact of organisational reform that the research team observed immediately following unification (Millings et al. 2023) also featured here in making sense of the potential challenges embedding PR may face.

Mawby and Worrall's (2013) seminal research captured how probation staff, at all stages of their careers, found solace from processes of organisational change through the collective sharing of an enduring commitment to deliver services to the people they supervised. The resilience of a probation 'ethos' to believe in the processes to support individuals to change and reduce harm has been a feature of subsequent research findings that have deepened the understanding of the occupational culture of the service (see Burke et al. 2017, Tidmarsh 2023). As Robinson et al. (2017: 152) capture, the enduring 'moral obligation to help improve offenders' lives' helped ensure that even when probation practitioners were dispersed within a mixed economy of rehabilitation they could connect to a shared sense of occupational values. But haunted by the perception many had of the tiering of legacy National Probation Service (NPS) and Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) colleagues (Millings et al. 2023) we can detect the deep anxieties people report about PR having the potential to accentuate categorisations of staff and undermine the sense of occupational camaraderie they deem so vital to organisational well-being.

Moreover, in trying to make sense of the perceived indifference towards PR, managers in our case study area ($n = 5$) identified a potential tension between PR and the established sense of occupational identity they felt it could jar with. As Tidmarsh (2022b:94) notes, 'the title of "probation" confers upon the bearer a measure of authority, an air of trustworthiness that is a part of the process of professional legitimation. It also gives practitioners a meaning to their work that has traditionally been constructed around 'the common goal of offender rehabilitation' (Tidmarsh 2022b:109). In the two quotes below it is possible to identify the very strong sense that the emphasis on formalised professional registration - rather than bolstering practitioner's professional identity - is seen, by some, to threaten it.

I think there's a humility about being a probation officer, which is that you don't know everything, because you're always going to be encountered by something different, at

whatever level you are in an organisation like this. I get a bit nervous about when you end up in that sort of, "Well, I'm an expert," type language, because your authority dominates any opportunities for learning, I think, almost...what does that mean for people in the organisation who haven't got a qualification? Is it divisive on that basis? I don't know. I just... I don't need a pin or a register to tell me I'm a qualified probation practitioner. (Joe, SM)

'I'm a probation officer through and through. I've done this job now for two decades and I absolutely fundamentally value the role that we fulfil as an organisation with the people that we work with. Being on a professional register or otherwise would never change that for me. I'm committed to the role, I'll always be committed to the role, even though it's as difficult as it is, and I will always try and improve, and grow, and learn and develop. I think that... a professional register is never going to change any of that for me, really.' (Rachel, PDU Lead)

The resistance to the implementation of PR made by Joe and Rachel – and others – was not made flippantly and in their quotes (and wider interviews) we can identify two factors at play that shape their perspectives. At a more abstract level, both lament that there is a need for the probation service to renew – through PR – what to them are intuitive core probation values and skills of engaging in peer-to-peer learning and continuous reflexive practice. At a more granular level, dialogue about the capacity of PR to identify and embed good probation practice principles has been eclipsed by discussions of pin badges and e-mail signatures (to formally recognise Registration). What they perceived to be mere gimmicks distracted from the seriousness of the work being undertaken by the service. Moreover, it threatened to reopen the notion of a 'two-tier service' providing a symbolic and highly visible distinction between the registered and unregistered, replacing the public/private divide that had been an outcome of the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms (Robinson et al. 2016).

The potential for professional registration to enrich the probation service

Our research shows a prevalence of indifference amongst the sample in terms of PR and the implications. However, there were a number of people ($n = 14$) who offered qualified comments about the positive potential of PR. Though this cohort of participants represent less than a fifth of the overall sample, the insights they offer provide depth to the understanding of what kinds of messages related to PR may be required. They are predominantly long-serving staff operating at SPO level or above and were those people in our sample who – by virtue of their own expectations in needing to guide those they manage in the future – did identify they'd attended and engaged with PR briefing materials.

The capacity of PR to raise the external profile of the probation service and help the process of '*legitimising our role as a professional public service*' (Alice, SM) was seen as a means of acquiring the status that they believed other vocations have

secured. Feelings of being 'left behind' in comparison with other organisations such as social work – especially given the shared past and occupational synergies - also featured in the survey commissioned by the Probation Institute (Cognito Development Projects 2021). The following senior manager perspective represents this group well.

'I think it's important to have a professional register, it does give that message to staff that actually your qualification and your experience is worth something. I'm completely behind that, I think it's a good thing.' (Dawn, SM)

A second view, shared by 8 of those 14 who could see advantages in PR, was that a focus on registration would help sharpen attention on training and development more generally. Indeed, their support for embedding PR was conditional on the renewal of efforts to recognise and support professional development at all levels of the organisation. Many within this group at PO, SPO and senior manager grade staff had previously been PSOs, and they emphasised the need to stimulate Professional Registration to be more inclusive and to provide clearer direction on continuous development, especially for staff in PSO roles. But across this group more pervasively there was a shared belief in the need for a significant shift to fully culturally embed continuous professional development into the working conditions and environment of the organisation to help enhance the professional standing of practitioners.

'continuous professional development [is] only a good idea if people feel they've got space to do it. We need to move away from being very [MS] Teams-orientated because I think the best training is probably done in person where you're more likely to get a much more emotional connection to what it is that you're doing. That, I think, culturally, will probably take quite a while to shift. [If we do that] there is some professionalism with a capital P added to what we do. It's recognised. It's acknowledged.' (Ruth, SPO)

'I think it frustrates me, and maybe it's just not happened yet, but I think it's an opportunity, isn't it, to talk about what, "What do we want the profession to be?" and be a bit more aspirational and have these conversations in Probation generally? We don't have very much professional legitimacy in comparison to other professions, so social workers, psychologists, they all tend to have a higher status than Probation Officers, and I would want that process to have something more about really flying the flag for the profession and what we can bring.' (Lola, SM)

The scope to create space for staff to engage in reflective practice, to take advantage of centrally provided learning opportunities and to generating pathways to support enriching professional practice were all cited as tangible steps required to help deliver on the ambitions of PR. Accordingly, some saw the register as placing an onus on the employer to provide 'time and space' for staff to engage in professional development.

'moving towards a registration system, places a duty [on the organisation] for the ongoing professional development [...] The learning and development offer from the probation service, currently, is dreadful, actually. Again, we've created a process out of what should be the cornerstone of what we do [and] so, any sort of process - and the Professional Register being one of them - that is going to place an expectation on the individual and the organisation to have that time and space to do professional development can only be a good thing' (Amy, SPO)

For others, the capacity of a Professional Register to enhance the oversight and management of those looking to join or leave the organisation was seen as something that would help protect the integrity of probation practice. Of the 14 respondents who saw advantages to PR, some (n = 8) shared the view that maintaining a Register – rooted in core skills and competencies – would help staff secure confidence in their ability and that of their peers, and to feel more certain that bad practice (and practitioners) were being dealt with. Below a senior manager and PDU Lead reflect these perspectives:

'[A] Professional register sets us apart, the register is about whether you're a competent worker, as well. So, if you have any disciplinarys that's going to be out there, it is public [and] more to the point, if I sacked you tomorrow, and then you went for a job in a prison in another region, that doesn't follow you, at the moment [but] it will with the register, and that is becoming increasingly important. There's a real opportunity to say to staff, "You have to keep on top of your learning, because everything changes." and with that, we have to provide that learning.' (Robyn, SM)

'[A Register is] the right thing to do, because, for example, I know of someone dismissed from the service, last year. Hopefully, the purpose of this will be, he won't be able to come into practice again. I don't know how, in practice, it's going to work, but it feels like it should do. Nurses have it, don't they? Doctors have it.' (Carol, PDU Lead)

The maintenance of a Professional Register could, for this group, be seen to offer a form of protection in renewing the focus on continuous professional development and training in maintaining practice standards and in preventing discredited practitioners moving around the service or *'returning as agency workers'* (Lola, SM). Likewise, for staff in our sample who had left or were about to leave the Probation Service (n = 3), they could see merit in being able to cite having been on the Professional Register to support their efforts to build their careers beyond the Probation Service and help should they wish to rejoin the service in the future.

By way of counterbalance, for the positives reported here in protecting the organisation through the monitoring of staff, there were those who offered notes of caution and could be seen to push back against the momentum for rolling out Professional Registration. At a rudimentary level, there were some participants (n = 4) who, like the SPO below, wanted clearer guidance on the cost implications of maintaining one's place on the Register.

"The only issue I would be concerned about was if they started making us pay to be on it because they did that with social services. I've worked in social work as well and they brought a similar thing out and you had to pay so much every year to stay on the register. To me, that's just another financial con." (Rose, SPO)

Although there are currently no costs to staff for Probation Professional Registration, other registration schemes are sometimes dependent on membership income to cover the administrative costs involved (Cognito Development Projects 2021). The same feelings of reported uncertainty about the exact structure, form and consequences of Registration did result in some interviewees ruminating about what they considered to be the more cynical motivations at work. Citing their concerns about whether the Register will sit within and/or beyond the Probation Service we can find a group who expressed concerns that rather than be considered a progressive, forward-facing intervention, the measures are an attempt to stem the numbers of staff leaving the service.

"There's a lot of cynicism within the service about this register though, is it a way of keeping hold of staff, I think, with this register, it's very much you have to be trained to a degree or some sort of a refresher to a degree, so, there are a lot of people in probation thinking, "Is this just trying to plant the seed to stop people from leaving?", that's my understanding of it" (Tom, SPO)

Conclusion

The indifference reported by many of those probation practitioners we interviewed towards professional registration and the belief that it was another bureaucratic mechanism to reduce their autonomy with little negligible positive outcomes must be viewed within the context of the challenging conditions within which they were operating at the time. As we have previously observed (Millings et al. 2023), many practitioners consider unification to be a positive development after a turbulent period of restructuring and political meddling. Unification potentially brought with it the hope for stability, a more cohesive workforce, and increased consistency of practice. However, some three years on from the date of unification some staff were still struggling to identify any real improvement in either service delivery or the working environment (Millings et al. 2025). The experience of efforts to introduce PR into probation can therefore be seen as a microcosm of the sense of vulnerability and uncertainty experienced within the sector that persists as a legacy of significant organisational restructuring. The difficult working conditions and a perception of information overload our sample reported had a detrimental impact on their capacity to build their understanding of PR and its implications. For many practitioners unless they could see an obvious benefit/relief from these immediate pressures then their enthusiasm for PR, regardless of its merits, was inevitably tempered.

The analysis of responses to the two questions we asked about Professional Registration helps identify two further reflections. Firstly, based on the views of our sample, in the efforts to help overcome the lack of knowledge reported, it is

important that efforts to stimulate awareness about Professional Registration a) explain where the Register will 'sit' and be maintained and b) demonstrate how it can be part of the wider renewal of efforts to enhance service delivery. The staff in our sample who were most positive about models of professional registration qualified their views on the basis that the Register needs to have a catalytic effect on continuous professional development – time and resources - in ways that both advance their own individual careers and protect the integrity of probation service practice more generally.

Secondly, within our sample we can see that some groups of staff harbour deep concerns about how the language of individuals being 'on' or 'off' the Professional Register has the capacity to be divisive and – in their view - unfairly question the professionalism of colleagues. Although the PSO grade staff in our sample reported having limited knowledge about Professional Registration, it is telling that it was PO, SPO, and senior manager grade staff who have previously been PSOs who highlighted the need for Professional Registration to be more inclusive. Drawing on their own experiences and sensitive also to the legacies of experiencing organisational change within the sector, they offered a persuasive argument that, following the initial focus on the probation officer grade, it is important that discussions about proposed structures and ambitions for governing and acquiring Professional Registration speak more clearly than they currently do to staff at all levels of the organisation.

The need for stronger (and visible) political leadership to help educate the public about the work of the probation service and to manage their expectations about what rehabilitative work can be achieved, and when, is something that emerges strongly across our research work packages, operating as they have at local, regional, and national levels: within and beyond probation. Though this yearning to more meaningfully recognise the work of probation services is not new, its need has rarely been greater as the fragility of the service and scrutiny of performance has rarely been the subject of such intense focus (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023). The role of probation practitioners and the interventions they administer must be part of a wider systems approach that has the capacity to connect a series of organisations and resources to support long-term and sustained efforts to reduce reoffending. Professional Registration, conceptually, does evidence the ambition to seek to recognise and record the skills and competencies probation (qualified) staff have, and does explicitly renew the commitment to the crucially significant role the probation service plays within a more co-ordinated administration of criminal justice policy delivery. Though we feel this is a welcome and positive development - when thought of this way - our paper has helped to document how a staff group who are still coming to terms with the legacies of profound organisational change struggle to find the capacity to fully engage with Professional Registration, its aims, and longer-term ambitions.

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Notes

1. The 6 Probation Professional Registration Standards are (1) Support public protection and changing lives (2) Act with honesty and professional integrity (3) Promote and value each person as an individual (4) Responsible and accountable for my quality of practice and decision making (5) Establish and maintain professional relationships (6) Maintain my continuing professional development.
2. The Senior Managers group in our case study region include Directors of Operations and the Organisational Leads for, amongst others, Public Protection, Programmes, Learning and Development, and Business Strategy.
3. Probation Reset is an organisational policy that has been implemented to alleviate probation workload pressures. The focus of these measures also aims to target resources where they have the most impact i.e. at the start of the sentence. Probation Reset changes mandate that probation practitioner contact with an offender is suspended in the final third for all Community Orders and Suspended Sentence Orders with RAR and all licences. The changes also mandate the suspension of contact during the PSS period.

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