

CENTRE FOR CRIME  
AND JUSTICE STUDIES

# Probation Resources, Staffing and Workloads 2001-2008

Summary



The Trade Union and  
Professional Association  
for Family Court and  
Probation Staff

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## Summary

According to government plans, probation spending is set to fall by 3 per cent over each of the next three years, a prospect that has been apparently modified in part by the recent announcement of an additional £40 million for the implementation of community orders. The current financial climate is already chilly and many probation areas in England and Wales have been facing severe financial difficulties. Despite increases in spending on probation, recent years have seen reductions in the service's budget and many areas have been struggling to cope with balancing a growing caseload involving more complex working practices with a decline in resources. Many areas have drawn up plans to reduce staff numbers, involving redundancies, doing away with posts and freezing recruitment. Despite this, probation has performed very well on the majority of its performance targets.

In this report, we examine budgetary change, staffing and workload numbers and consider the implications of changes in probation organisation, notably the creation of the National Probation Service (NPS) and the subsequent transition to the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). We consider the implications of ongoing change in working practice and organisational structures.

Chapter 1 addresses the issue of budgets, staffing levels and workloads. Probation budgets increased after the creation of the NPS but more recently have declined. Between the creation of the NPS and 2006-2007, the budget increased by 21 per cent in real terms.

With courts' use of community sentences reaching record levels, probation caseloads have increased by almost a quarter since the creation of the NPS. Numbers of reports have fallen slightly, while the most time-consuming pre-sentence reports (PSRs) have fallen by around 17 per cent.

The numbers of staff involved in delivering or supporting work with offenders has increased by 37 per cent over the period we study. However, this increase masks the fact that the number of professionally qualified probation officers has fallen by 4 per cent. The number of people training to be probation officers has also fallen, by 30 per cent. By contrast, there has been a 77 per cent rise in the number of probation services officers (PSOs), who are less qualified and less well paid than probation officers. Managerial staff have also increased over the same period, by 70 per cent.

The ratio of offenders to qualified probation officers has risen from 31:1 to 40:1 – an increase of 28 per cent. Probation officers in England and Wales supervise caseloads which are much larger (on average, between 25 to 70) than their counterparts in youth justice.

Chapter 2 considers the implications of the shift to a national service. A persistent characteristic of probation during this period has been the pace of change. The introduction of a lengthy assessment tool, various new forms of interventions and ways of working with offenders, and centrally set targets

have all combined to form a turbulent environment into which yet more elements of change have been introduced. Nonetheless, as we note, probation has delivered across a variety of performance measures.

More change was introduced into probation with the creation of NOMS, a move notable for its lack of consultation and the speed with which the government accepted the proposals underpinning it. The spiralling costs of NOMS, and IT development, attracted adverse publicity and criticism, and the structure of NOMS was subsequently modified. Probation boards are now required to meet the robust criteria necessary to become probation trusts by 2010 or face having their services opened up to competition. The first six trusts have come into being as of 1 April 2008.

Just as this report was being completed, the Minister for Justice announced a consultation exercise designed to facilitate the use of the 'Best Value' system employed in local authorities. Boards and trusts will be required to make continuous improvements in services and this will entail consideration of whether some services could best be delivered by others in the public, private or voluntary sectors.

Chapter 3 looks at the relationship between budget and workload. A major problem for local probation areas is that they agree with the centre the levels of service they will provide during the year. Demand for services, however, is driven by the courts and, as mentioned above, their use of community sentences has reached record levels. Because unit costs for services are not available, it is not possible to predict the number of staff actually needed to deliver services effectively to the probation service's growing caseload.

The impact on probation work has resulted in areas using various methods to try to manage the increased demand. Sometimes this will involve offenders waiting to commence programmes or requirements of their orders. Budgets are calculated using a formula designed to address the particular circumstances of a probation area. The formula fails to do this adequately. In a survey of board members by the Probation Boards' Association (PBA) in 2007, there was considerable criticism of the funding formula, which was frequently described as 'not fit for purpose'.

Budgetary planning has been made difficult. Over- and under-spending was penalised by the National Probation Directorate (NPD) in its approach to micro-managing spending. Underperforming areas were penalised, with the effect that they had fewer resources with which to improve their services. Areas have also complained of receiving their budgets far too late to be able to carry out medium- and long-term planning. The centralisation of various budget areas also has resulted in higher costs to probation areas.

More recently, probation areas have described the problems many of them are encountering in balancing their budgets. This has resulted in many areas planning to reduce or cut posts and to freeze or defer recruitment to vacancies. The announcement of some £40 million to fund community orders as an alternative to short-term prison places offers hope to a service afflicted

by financial problems but, at around £1 million per area, even this sum may not be enough to prevent further problems.

Chapter 4 looks at issues of effectiveness and service delivery in a service in which change has been almost constant and where areas' financial resources do not meet their needs. It is interesting that the roll-out of two levels of the Offender Management Model (OMM) was funded with a sum totalling just over a third of that spent on consultants for NOMS.

Resource allocation seems to involve a 'sink or swim' approach. We also note that higher numbers of cases and workloads may place unreasonable pressures on staff, with the potential to jeopardise public safety – particularly in areas where there are disproportionate numbers of high-risk offenders.

We note also that the new Offender Assessment System (OAsys) involves a considerable amount of time to complete, obliging practitioners to spend more time on the administrative side of their job. The consistency of having the same offender manager for offenders is often not possible, with the National Audit Office remarking on the frequency with which offender managers change.

Although, as we mention above, probation has done well in meeting central targets, we also note criticism of some of these targets by the National Audit Office for not focusing on quality and outcomes.

In many areas, offenders are 'stacked' – waiting to begin programmes or elements of the requirements of their community orders. This means that the pressures upon services are starting to affect their ability to meet the aims of the courts when they pass community sentences.

Caseloads, it has been noted, have been 'silting up' with less serious offenders who, a few years previously, would have received a fine or discharge. In this respect, probation faces a problem similar to that of the expanding prison population.

Finally, we note that practitioners put in considerable amounts of time for which they are not paid. These hours are useful to the probation service but actually represent hard-working practitioners trying to cope with the increasing demands made upon them.

Our overall impression has been that a period of stability, reflection and objective analysis would be beneficial for the probation service. We are doubtful that this is likely to be the case.