

Interview with Helen Judge: Area Executive Director North East England

In 2023, HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) introduced the Area Executive Model as part of the broader One HMPPS programme, with the vision of creating a more cohesive and effective prison and probation system. A central aspect of this vision was to change the relationship with headquarters, allowing more resources and decision-making power to be transferred to frontline staff. By appointing Area Executive Directors (AEDs), this approach also fosters greater collaboration between prisons, probation, and their partners in each of the seven areas: North East, North West, Midlands, Wales, South East, South West and London.

Helen Judge, Area Executive Director for the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber has been at the forefront of implementing this new structure with six other colleagues each directing one area across England and Wales. Dr Ruth Armstrong has been working alongside these leaders over their first year in post. In this interview Helen and Ruth discuss how the One HMPPS model vision is playing out in practice, the challenges and the opportunities presented, and how closer partnership working between prisons, probation and other key services can lead to better outcomes for both the workforce and the people they serve.¹

Ruth: Thank you for agreeing to this interview Helen. Can you begin by telling us a little about yourself, your career path into this role, and what motivates you to do this work?

Helen: Throughout my career, I've always been motivated by a desire to make a difference in the lives of the most disadvantaged people in society. Whether it's people who have committed offences or victims, those involved in the criminal justice system often face significant disadvantages, and I care deeply about supporting them and enabling them to contribute to their communities.

I've worked in various roles over my career, including policy positions in the Home Office and

Ministry of Justice, where I focused on offender management, sentencing, and youth justice, but I wanted to move closer to operational roles, and that's what led me to this position. The criminal justice system offers both incredible challenges and opportunities, that's what brings me alive. There's a complexity in the work, but also a real chance to create meaningful change, both for individuals and the communities they return to.

Ruth: What is the vision of One HMPPS, and what does that mean for you in your role?

Helen: The vision for One HMPPS is about reducing reoffending and protecting the public by improving performance, enhancing partnership work between prisons and probation and with wider partners, and ensuring we lead a national service that is in service of the frontline and the outcomes we are striving for. My role is to drive those priorities in the North East, Yorkshire and Humber, to ensure we're supporting frontline staff while also learning from them to influence national policy and practice. It's a two-way process.

The Area Executive Director role is pivotal because it gives us the chance to shape priorities on our own geographical patch within a national framework which is itself informed by frontline insights. This relationship is incredibly important, particularly in a time where we are facing significant pressures like population crises, staffing challenges and financial constraints. The areas and roles are big enough to try new things, share practice, forge relationships with counterparts across all sectors and play a part in the leadership of HMPPS. And the devolution brings us closer to the localities and regions in which people live and work and that partners care about.

Ruth: A big part of the original vision was about changing the relationship between headquarters and the frontline. What does this shift mean in practice for supporting frontline staff?

1. With special thanks to Helen and her team, especially Jake Thirkell for helpful discussions and his support with Ruth's visit to the area. Thanks also to Marcella Goligher and the teams working under her in HMP Humber including the HOPE unit for their work to progress IPP prisoners serving indeterminate sentences, and the multi-agency teams working through the gate to support people as they transition from prison to life post-release. The evidence of area specific partnership working in HMP Humber and how this supports frontline practice was hopeful indeed.

Helen: This is about making the centre more responsive to the needs of the frontline within a national framework. We don't operate in isolation, we are a national service spending public money in an environment where there is lots of risk, and we need some consistent standards, policies and practices. But there is scope to try different things at area level and share the learning; we can support regional and local partnership working, and we can take the lessons back to the centre. We are making some area choices for instance about how we spend money to improve our estates, cut out process to increase time spent on the frontline and support local partnerships to improve employment outcomes. Part of this is about creating a culture where staff feel confident, competent and empowered to use their judgement and professional discretion. At the same time, we all have to be willing to let go of certain controls that don't directly contribute to reducing reoffending or protecting the public. If we can't demonstrate that a particular process serves those aims, then we need to ask ourselves: why are we doing it?

Ruth: What are some of your personal priorities?

I want to improve the way we work with people to change their behaviour. Get back to the core of our job to reduce reoffending and protect the public. That will help us stay safe and secure and get better outcomes for communities. We know the things that make most difference: a home, a job, the relationships we have with other people and the way we think about ourselves. One of the most important ways to enable change is through relational practice, which means that staff have constructive, boundaried, psychologically informed relationships with people in prisons and on probation. They are not afraid to ask questions and challenge bad choices, and they are positive about what can be achieved, they do what they say they will and they understand where people are coming from, for instance: their risks and triggers, the trauma they might have faced and their neurodivergence. In the end this is all about supporting and developing our people. This goes across all our work, and I have a working group focused on confident and competent staff development to support it. It includes ensuring that we foster a culture in which staff themselves feel respected, supported, empowered and safe.

The Area Executive Director role is pivotal because it gives us the chance to shape priorities on our own geographical patch within a national framework.

We are also doing several tangible things to improve resettlement and community support, with a strong focus on employment and housing. We are developing more one stop approaches in which different criminal justice and social service partners spend time on the same site to provide advice and a launchpad to a more positive future: departure lounges for prison leavers and community hubs for people on probation for example. In prisons, I want to maximise purposeful activity — work, education and wider enrichment and connect that to the opportunities in the labour market on release. There is lots that probation and prisons can learn from each other here. We are trying to ensure the investment we have made in employment and skills in prisons works for probation too and that we can make the most of Community Payback to build employability. And probation have done lots of work already on relational practice that prisons can learn from.

Ruth: I recently learned about the Back to Basics initiative in your area. Can you tell us more about this initiative? What impact has it had so far?

Helen: In my meetings with frontline staff, they have made it clear they want to practise their craft and be trusted to do so. Some staff have expressed that too much process can take them away from that. The Back to

Basics initiative is a response to that problem. It is literally intended to help staff get back to doing the fundamental work that makes the difference.

It started in Sunderland probation and has been driven by staff themselves. They've been empowered to identify which processes are getting in the way of their work and suggest improvements. Staff have mapped out their workflows and highlighted where they can reduce unnecessary steps without compromising on safety or effectiveness.

The home visit risk assessment process is one example of where this initiative has already made a tangible difference. What used to take up a huge amount of time for probation officers has been massively streamlined, freeing them up to do more home visits and focus on building relationships with those they supervise. We're seeing other ideas come through, too—from prison and probation staff—about how we can streamline process in other areas. This initiative is now being rolled out across the

region, and we're looking to introduce it in some of our prisons as well.

Ruth: What do you think gets in the way of staff doing their best work?

Helen: I might say time, but the problem with that is it lets us off the hook a little. So, it's not just time—it's about how you use the time you've got. Time and workload are massive constraints, but I think if staff feel confident and curious, and there's a culture in which those qualities are encouraged and supported, they'll use whatever time they have in the most creative and impactful way. There are lots of examples of brilliant staff across the Service doing that.

We haven't always created a culture that makes it easy for staff to focus on what's most important—getting the basics right, building relationships with people, using their professional judgment, and thinking about the individual rather than just the process. The best processes do help us make informed decisions, assess and manage risk of harm to self and others for example, but sometimes we are all about the process and we don't step back and consider what it's there for, what the information is telling us and what we might do about it. And sometimes we can change processes ourselves, but we don't realise that. I think data is very important too. We have to use it to inform our work, ask ourselves what it's telling us and how it should shape our decisions rather than admiring what it looks like.

Ruth: What can you do to build staff confidence and give them time to focus on relational practice?

Helen: That's a combination of things that includes leadership, culture, training, support, clear, accessible systems that cut out duplication, improved processes and sharing learning. There's a big time element to this, of course, but I think we need to foster a culture where relational practice is at the heart of what we do—it requires briefings, and training around psychologically informed and trauma-informed practice, checklists of steps we can take, supporting

and encouraging our middle managers to talk about it. Encouraging curiosity during briefings and meetings is one way to build that culture—asking why incidents are happening, why people are behaving the way they do, and making connections.

It's also important to celebrate the skills of both new staff and those with more experience. New staff bring different perspectives and ideas, but need the opportunity to learn from those with greater experience. I saw only the other day in one of my prisons a senior officer de-escalate a challenging situation using experience and relational skills and teach a new recruit how he did it. I've seen some incredible practice for example in care and separation, or segregation units, on Drug Recovery Wings and in Psychologically Informed Planned Environments (PIPE units) in which staff have come to understand the people they are working with and support them to stay calm and stable.²

We can support regional and local partnership working, and we can take the lessons back to the centre.

Ruth: How does the regional approach help to strengthen partnership working and take a systems thinking approach to getting the kinds of outcomes we care about in our criminal justice system?

Helen: I think there's some great partnership working across the criminal justice system that seeks to take a systems approach. It looks at all the different elements of why somebody is offending and asks what we collectively, as a criminal justice service and with other partners can do about that. Some of our work with people who have mental health needs, integrated offender management, and women who have committed offences are all characterised by a systems approach. These are complex cases where there are lots of partners and organisations involved, and we come together to support these individuals to reduce their reoffending. We still have plenty of work to do, but there are good examples.

In Yorkshire, we have a strong reducing reoffending partnership chaired by the Deputy Mayor for West Yorkshire that brings together probation, prisons, police, health services, DWP, the voluntary sector and police and crime commissioners across

2. PIPEs are part of the Offender Personality Disorder (OPD) pathway in prisons and in Probation Approved Premises in the community. They are designed to support the transition and progression of prisoners and people on probation at significant stages of their sentence and beyond.

Yorkshire. It's about thinking collectively about offending and how to address it. In my mind, it's not just about specific programmes for each offending type, but about thinking at the level of the locality—what are its biggest needs? What does the data tell us about crime and the social profile? And how can we, as partners, work together to tackle it? Could some people be diverted from the CJS altogether for instance? What can we offer through community orders for example and how can we use all our convening power to get prison leavers into jobs and housing? It's all about taking a data informed, practice informed, systems thinking approach to make sure we're focusing on the most important issues at the right level, together. This is where a regional approach can be a real benefit.

Ruth: What have you been observing and enjoying in your region since taking on this role?

Helen: The best part of the job, by far, is going out to meet staff in both prisons and probation. I've been continually impressed by the craft, skill, and commitment they bring to their work. Whether it's prison officers using their experience to de-escalate challenging situations or probation officers building trust, reducing risk of harm and supporting victims of crime, it is clear that these professionals are deeply invested in supporting the kind of changes that reduce reoffending.

One tangible example of good practice I've seen is in our Integrated Offender Management (IOM) programme. In this initiative, we have probation, police and prison teams working together to manage some of the most prolific offenders, often co-located. The teamwork has been extraordinary. Seeing these partnerships in action really shows the potential for this model to deliver better outcomes.

I've seen so many great examples where prison and probation partnerships have made a real difference. For instance, in our work on organised crime, particularly in the North East, we've again seen excellent partnership working between prisons, probation, and the police. This collaboration has allowed us to identify those involved in organised crime and manage associated risks as they prepare for release, ensuring that they don't slip back into criminal networks.

Another area where this partnership is crucial is in resettlement, particularly for women in the criminal

justice system. We're seeing a lot of good work in how we prepare them for release, ensuring their needs around housing, finances, and healthcare are addressed. This kind of preparation is so important in stopping people from being recalled or reoffending once they leave custody.

But of course, there are still challenges. One of the main ones is around resources—having the time and capacity to really focus on this work when caseloads are high and resources are stretched. Despite these challenges, where we see practitioners coming together, the impact is undeniable, particularly in helping individuals transition from custody to community and reducing reoffending.

Ruth: If you had a magic wand and could change one thing about the prison and probation service in your region, what would it be?

Helen: I would love to see us reach a point where we have fewer people in the system because we've done such a good job at preventing reoffending. But in the meantime, the one thing I would change is the amount of time staff have to spend with individuals. Relationships are the cornerstone of effective offender management, and we need to make sure all our colleagues have the time and space to build those relationships.

Conclusion:

One year into the implementation of the Area Executive Model, there remains a strong commitment to appraising and refining this new model to better support front line staff and improve outcomes. The vision of changing the relationship with headquarters and decentralising power to the frontline is starting to show results, but there is more work to be done. Helen's reflections underline the need for a cultural shift that prioritises relational practice over bureaucracy and encourages professional discretion among staff. As the area leadership model develops, it will be essential to continue reviewing these changes and building the regional leadership skills to ensure they meet the needs of both staff and service users. Through regional initiatives like Back to Basics, the One HMPPS programme is striving to deliver a more flexible and responsive service where staff are empowered to define and deliver their best work.