

Keeping individuals, and communities, safe and supported.

Interview with Martin Jones CBE

*Martin Jones is the Chief Inspector of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. He is interviewed by **Professor Lynn Saunders**, Professor Applied Criminology University of Derby and former prison governor.*

Martin Jones CBE joined HM Inspector of Probation as His Majesty's Chief Inspector on the 1st of March 2024. Martin joined the inspectorate after nine years in his role as Chief Executive of the Parole Board. At the Parole Board, Martin was awarded CBE for services to victim's, transparency and diversity in the parole system. Prior to that he served as Deputy Director for sentencing policy from 2012 to 2015, and as Head of Crime for the HM Courts and Tribunal service from 2008 to 2011.

The interview took place in October 2024.

What made you want to apply for this post?

I had been in charge of the Parole Board for 8 1/2 years, which was an exciting place to work, deciding whether to release people that have committed some really serious offences. But, it was a heavy workload, with a lot of media and public interest, and if I'm being honest, I thought I needed a change. But I've always worked in Justice so I was looking for something in this area. Given the fact that the Probation Service works alongside parole, and that the Probation Service is key to keeping people safe, and that they are facing huge challenges, the role appealed to me. Because the Probation Service is such a critical part of the Justice system, I would actually say based on my 30 odd years of experience working around Whitehall, and in the Ministry of Justice, it can sometimes be a bit of neglected part of the system. What I mean by this is the work they do is sometimes behind closed doors and hidden away from the frontline. People who receive long custodial sentences and go to prison are always front-page news. The Probation Service is doing a really complicated, difficult job, and maybe sometimes they don't get the credit that they deserve. But also given what's been happening over the last 10 years in Probation, I also think these complex issues need to be sorted out, and I see my role as Chief Inspector of Probation as shining on light on what I think some of the issues and problems are, and hopefully paving the way for some kind of improvement.

You have spoken publicly about the pressures facing the Probation Service. Can you say a bit more about what you have found in your first few months in the job?

Yes, I'm a bit of a data geek and I'm always looking at the data, and thinking what does the data tell us? As you know, when I go out to a probation region and look at the performance, one of the things I look at is how many staff does the probation unit have compared to what they should have? I visit probation areas where they've got 50 per cent of the probation officers they need to do the job properly. That's clearly going to impact on the quality of delivery. High levels of sick absence also understandably puts people under pressure. People carrying too many cases can't really make the difference. Probation caseloads at the moment are 240,000 and then you look at the staffing levels, and it is very challenging to deliver the sort of change that we would want them to, and they are capable of delivering. I think as part of the government's Sentencing Review it has to look at what can be achieved within the current staffing envelope so that it can focus on delivering a good service rather than stretching itself too thin.

You've talked quite a bit about the challenges that probation staff are facing, and you've mentioned how these can be addressed. Can you summarise what you think should come out of the Probation Services' remit?

I think there's a few things. First, is the length of licence periods in England and Wales which have got longer and longer over time. I think this creates challenges for people being released from prison on the basis that licences are so excessively long that you can't see the end of the tunnel. What incentive is there to try and get your life back on the straight and narrow? If you go back 25 to 30 years, there used to be a certain proportion of your sentence where you were released on licence in the community, and eligible for recall when you were supervised and then your sentence

ended. The other area where I think we could make some progress is around short custodial sentences. I know the government is looking at what the options are and I'm really interested in looking at the statistics. The number of people the Probation Service is currently preparing for release is about a third of their caseload. It's about 80,000 people that they're planning for release primarily because of that short sentence cohort. Looking at things like accommodation and the risk management plan, so relieving some of that double handling. I've also posed a question in the area of young adults in the probation system. The Probation Inspectorate did a report earlier this year and we spoke to children who were moving from being a 17 year old boy involved in the youth justice system, into adult probation. Some young people described it as like falling off a cliff. So what if we tried to pilot the idea of a youth justice service where if they have a relationship with somebody to keep working with them, rather than handing them over for the last year to the adult Probation Service. This way we are more likely to be able to keep that young person away from the revolving door of the criminal justice system. It's my experience as a young man, many, many, years ago that aged 18 you do not suddenly change as a person. Your former abilities remain, the same risk factors remain, so would it matter if the youth justice service could retain the cases for a bit longer?

Is that some extent shifting the problem in terms of resources to the local authority who are also under pressure for resources though?

Yes, I think that's a real issue. One of the issues I would observe when going out conducting inspections is that it feels like sometimes the Probation Service have been left holding the baby. You see problems with accommodation upon leaving custody, and problems with local drug treatment, and mental health support. The Probation Service is trying to sort that out because the local authority are not able to live up to their part of the bargain. The comparison I would make with youth justice at the moment is the statutory levers to pull in relation to partnership arrangements. Oddly enough the other part of my role is inspecting youth justice services. There is much better leadership at a local level and they are able to pull levers to ensure that children get the services they need. I don't think those levers are there in the same way with the adult population.

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Is that an argument to decentralise the management of probation?

This is a question that's been vexing me for some time as Chief Inspector. When I go out on an inspection, we see a Probation Service that is still recovering from two major reorganisations having taken place within the last nine years. I don't think people have properly appreciated the underlying damage it has caused to the service. I don't think the Probation Service, where it currently sits, should go through a major reorganisation in the short term. I think this will cause further disruption to the service, but I totally agree that the best way of delivering better probation services is through local autonomy, empowering local managers to make decisions, linking

up with local authorities, local mayors, and local agencies to deliver what is needed. I think what that means is, and I will draw the comparison between prisons, there is the need for national systems and controls but in reality, you still want a prison governor that can get on and do the job to decide what's right for the prison and provide the leadership that's needed. I think that's even more important for local probation because every area is different, and the gap is different. Challenges around recruitment are different. For example, the difference between

a local authority bordering on London, where you've got the London drag effect, versus the challenges you have working in a much more rural area. So, my view would be the direction should be back towards more local autonomy.

You said publicly that you welcome the recruitment of 1000 new probation officers that's recently been announced, but what can be done to retain existing experienced staff?

I think that is the thing that's worrying me most about what is currently going on with probation. It's always good making up analogies for sort of thing, but at the moment it feels like we're running the tap really hard to try and recruit probation officers, but there's a hole at the bottom of our bucket. We're losing experienced people in particular quite fast, so actually despite the fact that there's a huge amount of effort, resource, and hard work gone to recruit additional probation staff the overall numbers have not dramatically improved. I think there are a few things that need to be done. First, I think we need to have an

an honest look at who we are recruiting. I've been out on probation inspections, and I think they are incredibly good at bringing relatively young people directly from university to be trainee probation officers. I think there's some superstars of the future amongst those officers and they do a fantastic job. But my worry, knowing about modern employment, is how many of those people are going to be with us in three to five years? How many of those people will say this is a really difficult stressful job, and decide to move on and get another job? I think there's something about what the overall employment offer is. When you speak to people that have been around a while, they say that you've got to catch people to ensure that they stay. In a really competitive jobs market, how can the Probation Service have the right employment offer in place to retain people other than for the love of the job? Ultimately, people have to pay the bills and their mortgages. I think there's a whole piece of work we need to look at in relation to why retention is working better in some places than others, and ensure that people recognise they are doing fantastic work. The other thing is to identify areas for employer improvement and where I, as Chief Inspector, can assist in raising those standards.

You've already talked about producing reports that say a particular area service requires improvement or is inadequate. How does this effect the motivation of staff? Is there anything the inspectorate could do to help support teams that are facing these rather difficult verdicts on their performance?

Actually, I do. There are a few things we're actively looking into at the moment. We're looking to publish region by region reports identifying effective practice. When we go on any inspection we see some fantastic best practice, but it's buried within an individual report. So we don't share it in a nationalised form. Some best practice, for example, is when we went out to Essex in the summer. We saw some really fantastic work taking place dealing with the needs of the female population on probation. Now people in South Essex know that we've raised it and we've published our report. But if I'm currently sitting in Hull I am not reading a report from Southend. So how do we escalate that sort thing that encourages people to read about best practice? A lot of themes we see are pretty consistent, staffing,

excessive caseload and problems with assessing risk. I guess my view is that when I'm seeing that locally, what are the blockers and enablers at a national level to understand why we're seeing that.

So is the benefit of a national system that you've got someone with an overview rather having a local system so best practice can be shared across the country rather than across the local area is that one of the benefits?

Well I think it potentially is. I guess the only thing that I would say that would undermine that argument is that 75 per cent of youth justice services that we inspected were either good or outstanding, and that contrasts with the facts as of today. I think I have published 18 probation inspection reports, all of whom have either been inadequate or requires improvement. But if I am in the youth justice service somewhere in the country and I've got a real problem with a particular area I can go to the HMIP website and say which areas are outstanding in this area, and I can go to visit that local authority up the road a few miles away, or set up a Teams call and ask to look at their processes and procedures. We need to get to a position where we have a better spread of performance. Some of the areas I have seen have got the potential to be good, if not outstanding.

So what relationships do you have with the Prisons Inspectorate? Because they do something similar to that don't they? As you know my background is prisons. We always used to look at inspectorate reports from similar prisons to see why they were doing things better than us, or sometimes vice versa, isn't that an argument for sharing best practice? Why is it not especially prevalent in probation?

I think that's part of the issue if I'm honest. People are so localised dealing with their own individual problems so are not able to lift their eyes and look above that. I think that's the reason why the inspectorate could do more and try to make it easier for people to do that. We did a piece highlighting best practice earlier this year and we're thinking about how to share information better. But we've not pulled these out and that's an area I think we could do much, much better and make it easier for people. In respect of HMI

How many of those people will say this is a really difficult stressful job, and decide to move on and get another job?

Prisons, I see Charlie Taylor probably once every three or four weeks and we do joint inspections. I do think there's a lot more we can learn through performance of HMPPS through our dual lenses and ensure that we understand where the rubbing points are, and where things are working better and drawing that out.

We both know that the government plans to reduce prison numbers is having a massive impact on the probation service. As you said there is huge challenge about how people are coping but how much are you going to take that into account when you carry out your inspections?

My public position on the SDS 40 changes is that it was inevitable that the government was going to implement an early release scheme relatively shortly after the election. The question for me was how they were going to pull it all together. My immediate concern was that the change could come within two to three weeks and that would have been a disaster. I think this would have caused huge problems for both prisons and probation. I think having eight or nine weeks for the first set of releases and 12 to 14 weeks for the second set of releases has meant that it gave them a fighting chance to do the job well. Of course there's always going to be niggles, but I think my overall view is that the Probation Service rose to the challenge and that there were people performing heroics, probably working too late into the night to ensure that plans were as well made as they could be. But the underlying point is absolutely true, which is what you're really doing layering on extra cases on top of excessive caseloads and the service is hugely under pressure. We are recalibrating the way in which we do our inspections to take account of that fact.

Just a final question from me Martin. What do you think your weaknesses are?

I'm far too optimistic, I'm like a relentless optimist and I always think that whatever the size of the problem we can sort it and we can fix it. Generally speaking, I'm of the view that it's much better to be positive than 'oh God the world's ending we can't do anything about it'. That's the same approach I bring to the Chief Inspector of Probation role. When I look at the level of performance I'm seeing I'm thinking 'gosh it can be better'. But I'm thinking hopefully I will be able to be able to help the service improve, by actually highlighting areas where some decisions need to be made but also bringing out the importance of the job that the probation officer does and the value that they bring. Most people that end up in the criminal justice system aren't there because they're fundamentally evil, it's because of speaking what has happened to them that's led to a downfall in their lives. You can fix some of those underlying problems. They can be safely managed in a way that means there are fewer victims in the future and that communities are therefore safer.

Well thank you very much for your time, Martin I really appreciate it, and good luck with the role sounds like you are massively positive and enthusiastic which is obviously great starting point so good luck for the future.

Talk to me in two years' time and see whether I still feel the same!

It would be good to do that. Thanks again.