

Speech: Probation reform: open letter from the Secretary of State for Justice

Successful offender reform depends on so many people. Among the most vital are probation staff, who seek to improve the lives of those they work with and, by extension, society as a whole. They are key to disrupting the cycle of reoffending.

At present, half of all crime is committed by those who have broken the law before, often more than once: there is no doubt that society is owed a probation service in which judges and magistrates have confidence and which consistently and effectively enforces sentences handed down in our courts.

Since becoming Justice Secretary I have been privileged to see probation in action, helping bridge the gulf between life in prison and life on release. Each day the service must assess the risk that an offender poses to their family and the public and decide about how best to support their fresh start. As importantly, probation staff support victims of violent and sexual crime.

While there is no such thing as a typical offender, all of them must overcome similar hurdles if they are to build a better future. A job, a home, decent mental health, and a determination not to abuse alcohol or drugs: these are the common goals. In pursuit of this, probation services are assisted by an invaluable band of charities and volunteers as well as staff from local authorities, police and the NHS among others.

They have all worked hard through the recent period of fundamental change in probation, driven by significant government reforms to this very complex public service. Over the past year my department has been reviewing the progress of these reforms, and I will myself take a close and careful look at overall performance in the coming months.

The structural reforms saw the caseload divided between the National Probation Service (NPS) – which took on higher-risk offenders – and 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs,) set up to supervise those judged to be low- and medium-risk. Here, the system has encountered unforeseen challenges. Demand has been stronger for the NPS caseload and this has created different financial and operational pressures for both CRCs and the NPS.

We are putting in place balancing policies aimed at addressing these challenges. To date, we have adjusted the CRCs' contracts to reflect more accurately the cost of providing critical frontline services: given this, we are calling on them to provide better support as they help offenders build more positive lives.

It is also clear that 'through-the-gate' arrangements – which support

prisoners as they leave jail and re-join society – are falling short of our vision for a high-quality service that both reforms offenders and commands the confidence of courts. In this, I recognise the problems identified by the Probation Inspectorate and am looking at how to address them most effectively in the context of the wider probation picture.

With mental health and treatment services in such high demand among offenders, it's also my priority to improve their access to and engagement with them. We are developing a joint protocol with the Department of Health and other bodies to bring the work of probation, health and treatment services closer together. And since transparency is key to effective public service reform, probation providers will come under keener scrutiny. Taxpayers should know how money is spent on their behalf to improve lives. To that end, we are giving more funds to the Inspectorate to carry out annual performance reviews and publish individual ratings.

In coming weeks, our conversations with staff, judges, magistrates and other key partners and stakeholders will continue. Reform is as much evolution as revolution and we will never stop seeking to improve the public services on which we depend.

I remain firmly committed to cutting reoffending with the support of an effective and stable probation service.

The wider vision for offender rehabilitation is the same: to push ahead with prison reform, harness our probation skills to achieve the best possible outcomes for offenders – and create a safer society for all.