

# LESSONS FOR PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORM

**From the Insourcing of Probation  
Services in England and Wales**

Harry Annison  
Daniel Birungi  
Matthew Millings

Nicola Carr  
Gwen Robinson  
Lol Burke

# This briefing draws on findings from a major longitudinal research project examining the insourcing from 2021 of probation services in England and Wales.<sup>1</sup>

**Probation** is a powerful case study from which to derive lessons for public service reform: **it has experienced decades of ongoing reforms, including a major outsourcing initiative in 2014 that was reversed less than 10 years later.** These significant changes have happened so swiftly that many probation practitioners can reflect on living through multiple iterations of probation organisations.

**Decades of ongoing transformation causes probation to be a change saturated area, in need of re-centring its sense of purpose.**

Presently there is lively ongoing debate regarding mission-based governance, and related questions of devolution: how might government ‘lead with purpose, govern in partnership’;<sup>2</sup> ensuring that public sector organisations and professionals are empowered to achieve important social policy goals such as improved public safety?

Probation’s situation also speaks to the way in which many public services must pursue multiple objectives: in this case seeking to facilitate rehabilitation, oversee punishment and pursue public protection through risk management.

Decades of ongoing transformation causes probation to be a change saturated area, in need of re-centring its sense of purpose. This is in a context in which informed observers have identified a wider crisis in public service outcomes.<sup>3</sup> **Probation’s situation is exemplary of the dilemmas faced by public sector organisations more generally in a context of profound challenge, and potential opportunity.**

The current situation has left probation leaders being required to pursue two objectives that are unavoidably in tension, and which face many public sector leaders in the present context: first, to ensure stability for a professional cohort many of whom are traumatised by operating in such a challenging context. Second, to effect further changes that seek better to enable good practice; alongside fostering a richer – and more ‘ground-up’ – sense of the desired nature and purpose of probation. In other words, **what is the ‘mission’ towards which probation is driving?**



<sup>1</sup> ‘Rehabilitating Probation’, ESRC-funded project Ref ES/W001101/1, January 2022–March 2025

<sup>2</sup> Mazzucato (2024) ‘Mission Critical 01: Statecraft for the 21st century’. London: FGF and UCL IIPP: 6

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Government, Public Services Performance Tracker. Available at <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/trackers/public-services-performance-tracker>

# Lessons for Public Management Reform

## 1. The Enduring Imprint of Prior Outsourcing

Structural change - understood in the longer span of prior outsourcing - represents an extraordinary energy drain on those involved at every level of a public service. It destabilises the foundations upon which practitioners operate. It undermines the sustained fostering of clarity of purpose, and quality of practice. This all encourages a clear-eyed recognition of the considerable costs that public management reform brings with it.

**“It wasn’t until I saw the physiological reaction of [staff] when [prior outsourcing programme] Transforming Rehabilitation was mentioned that I realised how significant that trauma is for many”**

*Senior Probation Leader*

## 2. Interrogating Conceptions of Successful Change

Change is experienced at different ‘speeds’ and ‘trajectories’ by different leaders, practitioners and stakeholders: formal milestones of change cannot be taken for granted. When a reform programme has ended, or when a change process even began, is an open question. Failure by leaders to recognise and respond to these dynamics can lead to frustration, overload and disaffection.

## 3. Challenges for (Re-)Legitimation in an Organisational Field

An insourced organisation must seek to achieve (re-)legitimation along moral, cognitive and pragmatic dimensions. In the case of probation, insourcing has helped restore moral legitimacy by removing the negative connotations of privatisation, and it is generally viewed as a valued, taken-for-granted component of the criminal justice ‘architecture’ (cognitive legitimacy). However, the service faces significant challenges in demonstrating its ability to meet the substantive needs of its partners (pragmatic legitimacy)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>See Robinson, G. (2021), Rehabilitating Probation: Strategies for Re-legitimation after Policy Failure. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 60: 151-166

## Rehabilitating Probation: Rebuilding culture, identity, and legitimacy in a reformed public service

The ESRC funded study, Rehabilitating Probation, explores the experiences and consequences of the unification of probation services in 2021 for managers, practitioners, partners, and service users. We examine the lessons that emerge about how to rebuild culture, identity, and legitimacy in a reformed public service. Our analysis is based on over 340 interviews, across three annual sweeps, and run research-led workshops in and beyond our case study region.



**Find out more**

[www.rehabilitating-probation.org.uk](http://www.rehabilitating-probation.org.uk)

# Insights from the Project: Current publications

## A Necessary but Painful Journey

The first article in a three-part series, published in the **Probation Journal**, analyses the first sweep of interviews with probation leaders and practitioners in our case study region to explore the initial experiences of the insourcing process.

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## Anchors Through Change

This paper explores identity work by practitioners, and how anchors – values, places and structures that are part of probation's legacy – help them to navigate through successive reforms.

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## A Fork in the Road

The **second article** in the series examining experiences in our case study area, finds that 'unification' continues to be a painful process whose end state remains elusive. We identify profound questions about the delivery of probation services. The final article in the series will draw on the third sweep of interviews and be published in 2025/2026.

### READ MORE



## Indifference, Resistance, Possibility: Perspectives on professional registration

This paper explores the roll-out of the probation Professional Registration policy framework. It identifies dangers and possibilities, arguing that the fragility of the service makes efforts to strengthen the reputation of probation as a valued profession even more important.

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## A Study of How Senior Penal Policy Makers Narrate Policy Reversal

This article, published in the **British Journal of Criminology**, provides a narrative reconstruction of the actions and experiences of senior policy makers. Analogies with desistance literature are drawn upon in order to encapsulate the tensions they experienced.

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## 'The Secret Lives of Prisons' collaboration

A collaboration with the **Prison Radio Association** has resulted in two podcasts that focus primarily on the project activities co-designed with peer researchers.

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## Contributing to Policy and Practice

We have been pleased to contribute to government reviews including the **Sentencing Review**, parliamentary inquiries including on the future of **rehabilitation and resettlement**, and many other consultations

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