

Let's fix

PROBATION FOUNDATION

A local service not the civil service

10 REASONS THAT THE CIVIL SERVICE CAN'T DO PROBATION

Probation was once a successful local service. But in 2014 it was amalgamated into the civil service. It has not been run successfully ever since by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in the Ministry of Justice.

Probation staff are now civil servants, but centralisation has been a failure and UNISON is campaigning for probation to be removed from civil service control and handed back to local delivery and oversight. The civil service can't do probation because:

Central control is bad for local delivery

Prior to 2014, probation trusts were high performing local services working on the same footprint as police forces. This allowed effective working with partners like the police, courts, local authorities, the NHS and the voluntary sector. In 2014, trusts were abolished in favour of direct management by the MOJ for half the service and privatisation for the other half. And

performance has never recovered. From June 2021, the whole service was unified under MOJ control.

Central control tramples over professional independence

Before 2014, there was a chief probation officer in every local probation trust, working at the same level as the chief constables in local police forces. Thirty-five of these chief probation officers collectively led an independent profession.

The 2014 reforms to probation axed all these positions and now there is only one chief probation officer, who is a senior civil servant. Independent, local, professional leadership has been lost.

Generic jobs damage local responsiveness

HMPPS has removed specialist probation jobs and replaced them with generic roles that cover too many responsibilities. This includes the closure of divisional sex offender units and the removal of specialist enforcement officers. This cost-cutting measure has destroyed local responsiveness.

The prison service dominates

The prison service is now the dominant partner in HMPPS, with probation forced into a subservient position. This means that frequent prison crises eat up ministerial attention and resources which are denied to probation.

HMPPS wants to own the professional register

There has been talk for many years of setting up a professional register for probation practitioners. HMPPS first proposed that it should become the registration body for probation, which would make it both judge and jury over professional matters.

MOJ central services are inefficient

The civil service centralises/privatises functions like payroll, HR, and facilities management, which has led to probation pay and conditions, including pensions, being poorly administered. This is an inefficient system that has lowered staff morale and productivity.

Civil service pay is chronically low

The probation service is unable to recruit and retain skilled staff due to the chronic low pay issues in the civil service. In March 2024, the Public Accounts Committee identified **the link between longstanding pay issues and staff satisfaction.**

Workloads are unmanageable

The Probation Service has a workloads crisis, which is why UNISON is part of the joint union

campaign **Operation Protect.** Staffing shortages, unmanageable caseloads and high levels of stress have not been managed down by HMPPS, which means that probation workers, people on probation and communities are all put at risk. Meanwhile, the civil service is too slow and bureaucratic to tackle this.

Constant reorganisation causes churn and disruption

The civil service is in a state of almost constant top-down reorganisation, which has never allowed probation to just get on with its core mission. The One HMPPS strategy to align prisons and probation is just the latest in a series of ill-conceived and poorly delivered change programmes designed to reduce the independence of probation and make it more difficult to extract it from civil service control.

More senior managers won't solve these problems

The One HMPPS strategy has created a totally new layer of senior managers (area executive directors) at great cost to the public purse, when what is really needed is a focus on supporting frontline staff with better pay and conditions.

Until probation is removed from civil service control and handed back to local management and oversight, it will continue to struggle. If you are not already a member of a trade union in probation, join UNISON now to add your voice to our campaign for a local probation service. Joining is easy – just visit <http://join.unison.org.uk/>

Let's fix probation. A local service not the civil service.