

Editorial PQ27

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Published version

PHILLIPS, Jake (2023). Editorial PQ27. Probation Quarterly, 27, 5-6.

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Welcome to Probation Quarterly Issue 27



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Serious failings: what next for probation?

<https://doi.org/10.54006/GJVC3870>

It feels as though probation has had a hard time since my last editorial. The publication by HMI Probation (HMI Probation, 2023b, 2023a) of two scathing serious further offence reviews in January led to a series of whistle-blowers exposing endemic problems in the Probation Service related to [workloads](#) and pressure to [assess people as low or medium risk erroneously](#).

It is not often that probation makes it into the national media and the last couple of months have certainly proven the point that probation rarely gets much attention unless things have gone wrong.

These two reviews and ensuing public concern have cast much needed publicity on the difficult conditions in which probation workers in England and Wales are working. Yes, mistakes were made in both cases, but they were – based on what practitioners tell me through my research – likely to have been made much worse by a workforce which is working under pressure, over capacity

and at considerable risk of burnout. We are also seeing the impact that TR and unification caused in terms of high levels of staff absence and attrition amongst trainees, new and experienced staff. As a result, the Service is ever reliant on less experienced POs and PQIPs who are – in turn – being supervised by overworked and less experienced SPOs than used to be the case.

The reviews are also being used to cast doubt on the ability of probation to do its job and protect the public from harm. This is perhaps most clearly evinced by the campaign to keep [Robert Brown](#) in prison as he approaches his automatic release date. It is telling that the victim's mother has said that she has 'no faith in the Probation Service' being able to supervise him on release. The impact that these high profile yet relatively rare events are having on the faith that the public has in probation should be of concern to many in the system.

These two interpretations have different ramifications for how the service is asked to respond. The first would lead to more staffing, reduced workloads, improved training in relation to risk assessment, a strong emphasis on staff retention and recruitment along with more focus on rehabilitation and appropriate enforcement. The second risks a pendulum swing towards the punitive, enforcement focused service once envisaged by the early New Labour government in its attempts to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. This would see the service become more risk averse, reduced levels of discretion for probation staff and a more explicit law enforcement role. My preference would be for the former interpretation – it is hard to argue against the fact that resourcing issues are at the root of these endemic problems. Whether those in power agree remains to be seen, but based on recent events in relation to attempts to constrain probation officer input at parole hearings (although the Secretary of state [has now admitted](#) that the parole board can ask for recommendations) and increased direct involvement in individual cases going through the criminal justice system I don't hold out much hope.

There is, however, cause for hope in relation to what probation can achieve and we see evidence of this across many articles in this issue. We start with a summary of Chris Dyke's research on parole decisions and the influence of probation practitioners. His findings show the important role that probation makes in these decisions and should provide some succour for when probation is – rightly – allowed to have a greater role in parole hearings in due course. In Ruchira Pounds article we hear about attempts within HMPPS to listen to women and hear about their experiences in order to improve the ways in which probation supports them. Although Finley MacDonald strikes a more critical tone in relation to the longstanding lack of attention to race inequality in probation she points to some useful ways

forward for the system to examine this problem beyond the current approach which is currently constrained by institutional silos.

Jenni Ward and Matt Cracknell then provide an overview of their research on people who are serving prison sentences abroad and identify some useful lessons for probation as a whole. Linnéa Österman and Lauren Hall's summary of an event they organised which examined women's experiences of desistance through the lens of emotion work should prove very useful for practitioners. This nuanced understanding of how women desist has real implications for probation and I look forward to seeing how their research in this area progresses.

Heather Abbey from the Barrow Cadbury Trust then takes an optimistic look at work currently underway to support young adults in the criminal justice system. Her article highlights some key insights on how young adults can be supported. In Matt Cracknell's second contribution to this issue he explores the ways in which probation's voice has been diminished in recent years before Nicola Carr provides an update on ESRC funded research exploring the process of unification being undertaken by her and colleagues. Finally, Paul Gavin offers an overview of how restorative justice has – slowly but surely – begun to be a mainstay of the criminal justice landscape in the Republic of Ireland. It is heartening to see that – where there is the political will – probation systems can take on a more humane approach. Maybe I should have some hope after all!

References

- HMI Probation. (2023a). *Independent serious further offence review of Damien Bendall*. HMI Probation.
- HMI Probation. (2023b). *Independent serious further offence review of Jordan McSweeney*. HMI Probation.