

September 15th 2013

Re Future plans for the Probation Service

We, the co-founders of the Independent Probation Alliance (IPA), are writing to you and all other MPs in advance of the passage of the Offender Rehabilitation Bill, to ask you to consider very carefully the implications for your constituents of the proposals that lie behind it. These are contained in the White Paper 'Transforming Rehabilitation' that has not yet been discussed or debated in Parliament.

The IPA members who have served in the National Probation Service have seen at first hand that rehabilitation is the key to reducing re-offending and the prevention of further victims, and have always advocated that it should be at the heart of the criminal justice system for it to be most effective. We fear that the proposals behind the Bill - which gave rise to many unanswered questions during its passage through the House of Lords - remain questionable not least because, as yet, no details of their viability or affordability have been published and made available for detailed scrutiny.

We fully support the need to supervise under 12 month prisoners. However, the decision to outsource the majority of current probation work based on risk levels in order to fund this is of deep concern. The risks are considerable and we would strongly urge the need to retain accountability in the public sector.

A small proportion of existing staff will form the new National Probation Service with responsibility for supervising all high risk offenders in the community, the initial assessment of all community sentenced offenders, provision of pre-sentence reports to court, the assessment of change of risk status of low and medium risk offenders and assessment of any breach of conditions by offenders. This is an enormous workload for a vastly reduced work force.

The current 32 regionally based Probation Trusts are concerned with supervising and managing 260,000 offenders a year (two-thirds of whom do not receive prison sentences) thereby protecting local communities.

In the last year for which figures are currently available, 2011/12, some 55,000 dangerous offenders were managed under the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements, of whom 145 were charged with serious further offences. Clearly it is not possible to eliminate risk completely but Probation's track record does show that the service can minimise the risk of harm posed by dangerous offenders.

Probation Trusts will be abolished from April 2014: the delivery of probation services for medium to low risk offenders will eventually be contracted out in 21 contract package areas. This will lead to a dilution of professionalism, accountability and local responsiveness, all of which are crucial elements in keeping the public safe.

You will remember that the House of Commons Justice Select Committee recently cast considerable doubt on the ability of the Ministry of Justice to let and manage contracts, doubts that appear to be borne out by the allegations against G4S and SERCO in respect of electronic tagging. This warning has recently been repeated in a report by the Institute for Government that advised the government to pull back its large-scale programme to outsource public services including probation because it does not have the skills, capacity or information to prevent it being overcharged by big private

companies. The report states that the proposed privatisation of probation was particularly risky due to the difficulty in measuring re-offending rates, the need for collaboration between a range of different services including health and local authorities, and the potential for fragmented services with potential competition for referrals.

The IPA considers that the government proposals as they stand would place the public at risk. We would therefore urge you to **vote in support of the Lords' amendment** unless you can be fully satisfied that the plans have been properly thought through, planned and costed in detail, and that private companies would be fit and proper to be entrusted with the professional supervision of offenders and the protection of the public.

We urge you to ask yourself the following questions whilst you consider discharging your responsibilities as elected members to best maintain public safety:

1. Why is it not possible to use the current public sector structure/system to integrate other providers from the voluntary and private sector rather than dismantling it wholesale?
2. Why bring in payment by results when it has so patently not worked in, for example, the Work Programme, and in the US?
3. Can you be satisfied that the costs don't outweigh the savings? Why use public money for private sector profit when savings could be used to improve the system?
4. Would the public want accountability and risk to be contracted out away from the public sector?

Thank you

Yours Sincerely

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