

Press Association article

PROBATION SERVICE 'HIT BY RED TAPE AFTER REFORMS'

LORDS Probation

Jan 21, 2010 5:19:06 PM

By David Hughes and Nicholas Randall, Press Association Political Staff

A series of botched reforms has left the probation service under-resourced and choked with bureaucracy, a former chief inspector of prisons claimed today.

Lord Ramsbotham said probation officers spent less than a quarter of their time working with offenders face-to-face.

He claimed the creation of the National Offender Management Service (Noms) as an umbrella body had led to a marginalised role for the probation service.

Lord Ramsbotham told peers that of the 4,270 people employed in Noms there were only 113 who had previously worked for the probation service "none of whom are in any senior position or in any of the main units".

Opening a Lords debate on the issue he said: "At the heart of the distinct role of the probation service within the criminal justice system is person-to-person supervision and rehabilitation of offenders awarded community sentences.

"Working with offenders in the community is not the same as working with them in prison and needs different training and skills."

Lord Ramsbotham said a Ministry of Justice survey found probation officers spent only 24% of time on direct contact with offenders either face-to-face or over the phone.

Some 41% was spent writing reports or letters on computers and 35% on other administrative duties or travel.

The crossbench peer said: "There can be no more damning indictment of the Government's failure to provide probation with the vital resources of people and time.

"It explains why probation officers tell you that some have caseloads in excess of 100 and that they can spend no more than 15-30 minutes a week with medium-risk offenders, often having no time for others."

He continued: "Government is fond of telling us how much worse things were in 1997.

"I do not deny, nor does the probation service, that all was not well with the way it functioned at that time.

"But all the bureaucracy and red tape I have described has been imposed on probation since 1997.

"No-one has suffered more from micro-management than probation, illustrated by the fact that there is now an external, an internal and a Noms auditor permanently present in each area probation chief officer's office on top of all the other time-consuming obligatory reports and returns, audit and inspection."

It was "seriously unwise" to put the direction of probation policy in the hands of people more familiar with the prison service, he said.

Lord Ramsbotham called for the probation service's independence to be restored with its own director general.

Crossbencher Lord Birt, who was an adviser to Tony Blair when the reforms were proposed in the early 2000s, acknowledged that mistakes had been made.

"I have personally never experienced a better example of the law of unintended consequences," he said.

Lord Birt blamed a revolving door of ministers who were either not interested or did not "stay long enough to get a grip".

The civil service failed to "drive the agreed implementation plan" leaving progress in the hands of "section interests" with little appetite for reform.

While there had been some benefits to the new system there had been an "emasculatation of the probation profession and ethos – the precise reverse of the original intention".

Lord Dear, a former chief constable and Inspector of Constabulary from 1990 to 1997, said: "To improve policing one of the best things you could do would be to improve the quality of the probation service."

But he said the creation of Noms had led to a "rapid downward spiral and very rapid disintegration of morale within the probation service".

He pointed to the case of Daniel Sonnex who was jailed last year, along with Nigel Farmer, for the brutal murder of two French students.

Lord Dear said the probation officer in Lewisham who had been responsible for Sonnex at the time of the murders had only been in the job for nine months but had a caseload of 127 cases.

"Ten years before a similar probation officer would have been carrying 30 or 35 cases," he said.

"In that office, of the 22 probation officers only one had more than two years' experience, the IT system didn't work, there was a high sickness rate – and we are told that in all this was a very unusual set of circumstances.

"I don't believe that. I believe that there are cases one could find if one lifted lids up and down the country that would certainly begin to approach that sort of thing."

He referred to a "tick box-driven culture" and "a preoccupation with bureaucracy".

Labour's Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen said the influence of the probation service had been "waning" since the creation of Noms.

"There was a fear from probation service personnel that they would be in the minority under the new Noms structure and it appears that they are," she said.

"Under these circumstances I believe there is an urgent need for the probation service to have its own operational arm with its own director, its own directorate and its own head of department."

Labour's Lord Rosser, who was formerly on the Noms management board, defended the reforms to probation services.

"I see the probation service as one that is moving forward. The probation service is a very committed service with very able and capable people at all levels who through their dedication have achieved a great deal.

"The changes that have been made over the last few years and that are in the process of being made have also contributed to giving us a probation service which regularly achieves virtually all the targets it has been set ... and delivers a service which has resulted in a reduction in the frequency of reoffending."

Former lord chief justice Lord Woolf, a crossbencher, said: "There is still good work being done by the probation service, but I'm afraid to say I see that as being despite the havoc that has been wrought with their profession over the years."

Lord Tunnicliffe, for the Government, said funding for the probation service had increased by 70% in 12 years while caseloads had increased by 53%.

He added: "We have continued to prioritise investment in the probation service. In 2010/11 a probation budget of GBP870 million, announced in 2009, is a good settlement.

"The budget provides an additional GBP26 million above our original planning assumptions. Directors of offender management are working with probation chiefs to ensure this additional funding is targeted on the frontline.

"The settlement equates to a reduction of 2.7% year on year. That is at the lower end of saving requirements across the public sector."

He said the Government wanted to free probation officers from "unnecessary bureaucracy".