Probation Institute

Exploring probation practitioners' transition to the new unified service

A small-scale exploratory study of 'legacy' probation practitioners in a West Midlands Probation Delivery Unit following structural alignment

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Probation Institute
Sir Graham Smith Award 2023

The Sir Graham Smith Awards scheme was established in 2002 in recognition of contribution of the late Sir Graham Smith to leadership in the probation service and the development of evidence-based practice. The Awards are an important and prestigious scheme supporting and mentoring short, accessible practice-based research projects across the justice sector.

Foreword by the Probation Institute

The Probation Institute is delighted to present the Research Report *"Exploring probation practitioners' transition to the new unified service."* produced by Kyle Hart as a holder of the Sir Graham Smith Award offered by the Probation Institute.

The Sir Graham Smith Award sponsors small practice based research projects to encourage practitioners to develop research skills whilst they are close to practice.

In this project Kyle Hart has researched an important area of practitioner experience in probation in the last ten years – the impact on practitioners transition to the new unified of national Probation Service from 2021 following partial privatisation of the service between 2014 and 2021. The findings are important in helping the Probation Service and allied organisations to navigate the ongoing complexities of these changes, to build a strong service going forward, and a contribution to informing the future. In the research report Kyle Hart shows skill as a researcher, in analysis of results and in writing up the results fluently and concisely. The Probation Institute welcomes and values the report which we will publish and launch in the early Autumn.

We would like to thank the West Midlands Probation Service Region for supporting Kyle Hart's project by enabling the research to take place and allowing appropriate time to complete the research and produce the report. Thank you to the practitioners who contributed to the research interviews.

The Sir Graham Smith Award Scheme is managed by the Probation Institute Research Committee in collaboration with our Academic Advisory Panel through which we are able to offer an academic mentor to the research projects. For this project we would like to record our thanks to Professor Lawrence Burke and Dr Matthew Millings both from Liverpool John Moores University.

We will be pleased to offer the scheme again from Autumn 2023 inviting applications for small practice based research projects across justice organisations.

Probation Institute July 2023

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Executive Summary

Background

The structural alignment process was a way of truly joining legacy NPS and CRC organisations together in some West Midlands PDUs in early 2022. As it was recognised that actual (re)unification of probation services would never properly land until there was increased cohesion in the makeup of legacy staff operating from the same spaces, holding blended caseloads, and reducing the feeling of 'us and them' because all probation practitioners were now part of one Probation Service heading into the future.

Structural alignment was the approach and process that the unified Probation Service in some West Midlands PDUs used to place practitioners and caseloads into the new organisational structure.

Purpose

The overarching purpose of this study was to explore if, and to what extent, a probation practitioner's previous experience (either legacy NPS or CRC) impacts on their thoughts, feelings and mindset about their role (and ultimately their performance). With a specific emphasis on groups of legacy probation practitioners working within a particular West Midlands PDU, and to capture how practitioners from these legacy organisations were feeling now they were working together from unified teams.

I explored how *confident, competent and committed* probation practitioners in this West Midlands PDU were now feeling almost a year on from the structural alignment.

Whilst acknowledging the concept of legacy and previous probation work experience, the study also aspired to be 'future focussed' so that the findings may benefit SPOs, middle managers, senior leaders and policy makers to assess the impact of structural change on its new unified workforce in the region.

The PDU in which this study was conducted has been anonymised and is referred to as 'Uptown PDU' throughout this report to keep focus on themes and findings rather than their location.

Methodology

Four, ninety-minute, focus group sessions were conducted with a total of 19 probation practitioners from the following four Staffing Groups (SG):

1. *'Always Probation Trusts/NPS' – those who worked for probation trusts before the TR split and remained in the NPS after.*
2. *'New CRC' – practitioners that joined CRC after TR and whose only experience has been gained within CRC.*

3. *'New NPS' - practitioners that joined after TR and whose only experience has been gained within the NPS.*
4. *'Probation Trusts-CRC-PS' – practitioners who worked for Probation Trusts prior to TR, then moved to CRC, and are now experiencing the reunification.*

The data was gained using quantitative and qualitative methods (i.e. rating scale questions were followed up with semi-structured exploratory open questions for participants to expand on their answers). The data is then analysed in this report using theory and literature from authors in the areas of self-efficacy, professional identity and culture.

Results

The quantitative data shows that SG3 provided the highest average scores of confidence, competence and commitment. SG1 provided the second highest scores whilst SG2 and SG4 provided the lowest average scores in all three areas.

When analysing the qualitative data there were many themes that came through in this study. Some of these themes are summarised below:

SG1 (Always Probation Trusts/NPS)

- Competence no longer exceeds confidence within SG1. They reported feeling more internally self-assured in their abilities, but the structural alignment had affected their impressions of actual capability (competence).
- Loyalty and commitment within SG1 was also complicated.
- Themes of 'exit' and 'organisational cynicism' came through in discussions with these practitioners when applying the adapted 'exit, voice, loyalty' model.

SG2 (New CRC)

- Spoke notably about the need for more face to face training and shadowing opportunities to increase confidence and competence.
- The sense of guardian within SG2 centred around wanting to deliver 'quality' probation work associated with a 'person-centred' practice culture.
- SG2 generally felt less committed than before structural alignment as this change had brought about more process-oriented work.

SG3 (New NPS)

- The notion that higher feelings of self-efficacy equate to higher internal impressions of competence is most evident within SG3.
- Higher levels of resilience were evident within SG3 and they reported the least feelings of stress, anxiety and burnout.
- SG3 also evidenced higher levels of commitment to the organisation itself and held a clearer sense of professional identity.

SG4 (Probation Trusts-CRC-PS)

- Reported feeling 'de-skilled' coupled with a feeling of 'fractured identity' and sensitivity that after structural alignment they were not 'good enough anymore' (marooned and abandoned by CRC and probation trusts prior and no longer feel sufficiently confident or competent within the new unified service).
- There was a sense of disempowerment that has led to some practitioners not feeling equally valued by seniors after structural alignment, which in turn has impacted on their commitment to the new unified service. Feelings of loss and separation within SG4 are the most complex and multi-layered.
- Those who provided positive scores and responses related this back to a feeling of increased and reconfigured professional legitimacy.

Conclusion

This report highlights that a probation practitioners' previous work experience has had an impact on their thoughts, feelings and transition to the new unified service and the extent of this impact is dependent upon their previous probation work experience.

Levels of confidence, competence and commitment vary between different staffing groups of legacy practitioners depending on whether they have experience of probation after or before the TR split and depending on which legacy organisation they initially joined.

This report shows that there is now a mixture of professional identities within Uptown PDU and practitioners are adopting a variety of coping strategies to come to terms with these changes.

This study suggests that the structural alignment changes have had a significant impact on professional identity and culture within the Uptown PDU.

Recommendations

This report ends with eight recommendations for increasing confidence, competence and commitment within the new unified probation service and PDU specifically:

1. The need for more *time* between changes to organisational structure and practice expectations.
2. The creation of better *career growth opportunities, more lucrative career progression prospects and develop career plans* with practitioners.
3. Increased *shadowing* opportunities and *face to face training* for practitioners.
4. Establish ways that the *proximity* between decision-makers and frontline staff can be reduced.
5. *I.T. systems* need to be improved.
6. Develop pragmatic ways in which service *efficiency* and practice processes can be streamlined.
7. The new unified service should facilitate a growth in feelings of professional *legitimacy.*

8. SPOs, middle managers and senior leaders should reaffirm what the core *values* of the new unified service actually are.

Introduction

Probation practitioners in Uptown experienced another significant organisational change in early 2022 called 'structural alignment'. This further change came after the national probation reunification in June 2021.

The structural alignment in Uptown was one of the biggest probation change projects in the country after the national reunification. Uptown is one of the largest PDUs in the country with an approximate total caseload figure of 3,800 cases.

This small-scale exploratory study explores the impact of these structural alignment changes on probation practitioners' confidence, competence and commitment amongst four different groups of 'legacy' National Probation Service (NPS) and Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) practitioners (i.e. probation officers and probation service officers) with varying degrees of previous probation work experience operating within the PDU.

This study consisted of four focus groups with 19 probation practitioners and the data was gained using quantitative and qualitative methods. The data is then analysed in this report using theory and literature from authors in the areas of self-efficacy, professional identity and culture.

Whilst this study may assist in exploring case management practices in Uptown amongst different groups of practitioners, this was not the intention of the study. Instead, it is hoped that this study provides a useful insight into the thoughts and feelings of different groups of practitioners in the new unified probation service following major structural change and that the recommendations contained within this report can be used to inform future operational activity.

It is also hoped that this study contributes to ongoing academic research in this field.

Setting the scene of structural alignment in Uptown

The reunification of probation services in England and Wales took place on the 26th June 2021 marking a significant date in the history of the probation service nationally. However, the 10th January 2022 was arguably a more important day for frontline probation practitioners working in Uptown.

The June 2021 reunification merged the NPS and CRC together to form the new 'unified' probation service. But the reality for frontline practitioners working in Uptown was that initial reunification felt like a conceptual paper exercise with no tangible change to everyday practice and service delivery. With the exception of one part of one office, most legacy CRC

and NPS practitioners in Uptown were still working from separate offices and spaces to begin with.

The 'structural alignment' process was a term that frontline practitioners began to hear more and more from October 2021. It was a way of *truly* joining the two legacy organisations together in Uptown. It was recognised that actual unification would never properly land until there was increased cohesion in the makeup of legacy staff operating from the same spaces, holding blended caseloads, and reducing the feeling of 'us and them' because all probation practitioners were now part of one *Probation Service* heading into the future.

The ambition of the exercise, whilst maintaining continuity of service in accordance with the Target Operating Model's (TOM) operational harmonisation roadmap (HMPPS, 2021), was to fully establish the structure of two new PDUs with fully integrated teams comprising staff from both legacy organisations.

Impact of the structural alignment

The impact that structural alignment had on frontline practice was that these January 2022 changes instilled a renewed intensification and assertion of the unified probation service's 'foundational practice principles'. This was a specific agenda to remind practitioners of the principles defined in legislation and statutory obligations within the unified services critical organisational policy. These are the areas that inform and support public protection and safeguarding children and adults obligations. These principles are: *assessment and planning, implementing the sentence, enforcing the sentence and risk management.*

The structural alignment brought about a heightened Uptown PDU focus on these principles in order to level-up consistency of practice amongst its new unified workforce. For example, all OASys reports were now being countersigned (and reports rejected and returned to practitioners with feedback for required improvement if not deemed adequate) by Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) and an increased scrutiny of frontline practice in line with national policy and processes in a bid to improve levels of 'quality', heighten 'standards' of service and increase the baseline of 'defensibility'.

Indeed, structural alignment allowed for the introduction of updated national policy frameworks and introduced some new PDU specific agendas too. Some of these included changes to home visit policies, MAPPA level 1 policies, core quality management framework policies, new quality development tools, new supervision models, a new competency-based framework and a new performance management framework etc.

In terms of the changes for (the newly re-labelled) People on Probation (PoPs) the structural alignment process also brought about the newly remodelled case allocation postcode boundaries, for which new and most existing cases were to begin attending the probation office solely relevant to the postcode they lived in (regardless of the PoPs' assessed risk). Previously all CRC cases reported to one central office (whatever their Uptown postcode was) and all NPS cases reported to their local NPS office.

This remodelled postcode boundary also took effect from 10th January 2022 alongside the mass relocation of practitioners themselves, which meant that most cases in Uptown also had newly allocated probation practitioners and practitioners had to quickly get to grips with their new blended caseloads (though legacy CRC practitioners needed to have completed their online 'transition training' before holding a blended caseload).

For frontline practitioners this meant that typically their caseloads either increased or decreased, or the level of caseload risk of harm and offence type they were used to managing significantly changed. As an example, all legacy CRC and NPS Probation Service Officers (PSO's) were now holding relatively equal caseload numbers in order to achieve consistency amongst this practitioner grade, which for legacy CRC PSO's typically meant a slight decrease in caseload and for legacy NPS PSO's an increase in caseload.

Clearly whilst the structural alignment presented massive positive opportunities to achieve mixed teams, caseloads and breakdown legacy identities, there was also an element of risk for all stakeholders involved. These PDUs did not exist before unification and so they were effectively starting from 'ground zero' with new teams, new caseloads, new managers and a new organisational structure. 60% of the management team in the Uptown PDU were also brand new at the point of structural alignment due to the regional SPO recruitment campaign at the time.

The only element of the structural alignment that had been part of the initial national unification programme was the TUPE transfer of staff and buildings from CRC into the new unified service in June 2021. There was no prior planning within the national unification programme as to how legacy organisations were going to be structurally combined in reality. This fell to PDU heads and leaders, for which they had no additional resources to develop this approach and had to consider capacity including things like: office spaces, desks, interview rooms, PoP footfall, postcode boundaries and required staffing for the new PDU structures.

Thus it can be seen that structural alignment was not an absorption of CRC practitioners into the NPS's existing structure. It affected all probation practitioners in Uptown regardless of their previous experience and legacy organisational background, contrary to some pre-unification perceptions that the changes in probation would be applied to CRC practitioners only and the NPS would just carry on as it always had. Therefore the reality of structural alignment, as described here, was a multifaceted, complex and significant change for all.

The Study

Aims, objectives and potential benefits

The main aims of the study were:

- To explore to what extent, probation practitioners' previous work experience and organisational background (i.e. NPS or CRC) has impacted on their thoughts, feelings and transition to the new unified probation service in the Uptown PDU following structural alignment.

- To explore the impact of the recent structural alignment changes on practitioners' views of their own performance in the new unified Uptown PDU workforce and the impact of these changes on practitioners' professional identity.
- To explore the practitioner culture within Uptown PDUs new unified workforce and assess if practitioners from both 'legacy' organisations now feel equally valued.
- To identify key themes, findings and recommendations that can be fed back to middle managers and senior regional leaders for them to consider as the structural alignment changes continue to embed.

Thus, the overarching objective was to explore if, and to what extent, a probation practitioner's previous experience (either legacy NPS or CRC) impacts on their thoughts, feelings and mindset about their role (and ultimately their performance) with a specific emphasis on groups of legacy probation practitioners working within the Uptown PDU, and to capture how practitioners from these legacy organisations were feeling now they were working together from unified teams.

Legacy CRC and NPS probation practitioners had been operating from the same offices, unified teams and holding blended caseloads for almost a year at the point of data collection in November 2022. So this small-scale exploratory study was thought to be timely now that Uptown hosted a 'unified' and 'merged' makeup of practitioners with different previous probation work experiences.

The study explored if practitioners' previous probation work experience now affects their mindset in relation to their role and performance by exploring 'confidence' in the form of self-efficacy and practitioners' own internal impressions of 'competence', and assessed 'commitment' to the role by way of career aspirations.

In short, I set out to explore how *confident, competent and committed* probation practitioners in the PDU were now feeling almost a year on from the structural alignment.

In addition, the study sought to explore other factors important to practitioners to help outline what they wanted this new unified probation service (and the PDU specifically) to look like heading into the future. The following broad categories were used to explore these factors further: *people, things, behaviours and outcomes.* Therefore, whilst acknowledging the concept of legacy and previous probation work experience, the study also aspired to be 'future focussed' and the findings may benefit SPOs, middle managers, senior leaders and policy makers to assess the impact of structural change on its new unified workforce in Uptown.

This study also sought to offer a rich insight into how different groups of practitioners were feeling now they are working together in unified teams in the PDU and by doing so will begin to offer early insight into the local impact of the Target Operating Model. As unification attempted to address the fragmentation brought about by the TR reforms and an associated sense that staff from different organisations were not equally skilled or valued. Thus it is

hoped that the findings are valuable and offer understanding about current morale, motivation and confidence amongst frontline practitioners in this new organisation.

The study also aimed to highlight any differences in responses between probation practitioner groups offering useful information for SPOs and higher managers given that their new teams consist of a mixture of legacy practitioners with varying degrees of experience. Any useful findings could be operationalised by having implications for the work of line-managers in the PDU (e.g. in areas like staff supervision, support, guidance and training).

Furthermore, on an individual practitioner level this study desired to help shape the future of the 'unified practitioner culture and values' within Uptown and may offer an alternative lens for managing wellbeing and resilience amidst an ever-changing environment where practitioners are expected to offer a high-quality service for public protection.

Design, methodology and sampling

This small-scale exploratory study specifically concentrated on groups of legacy probation practitioners (i.e. probation officers and probation service officers) working within the Uptown PDU.

I conducted four, ninety-minute, online focus group sessions with probation practitioners from the following four staffing groups:

1. *'Always Probation Trusts/NPS' – those who worked for probation trusts before the TR split and remained in the NPS after.*
2. *'New CRC' – practitioners that joined CRC after TR and whose only experience has been gained within CRC.*
3. *'New NPS' - practitioners that joined after TR and whose only experience has been gained within the NPS.*
4. *'Probation Trusts-CRC-PS' – practitioners who worked for Probation Trusts prior to TR, then moved to CRC, and are now experiencing the reunification.*

The focus group schedule contained three 'rating scale' type questions to assess on a scale of '0-10' how confident, competent and committed practitioners felt now the structural alignment changes within the PDU had taken place, and now that practitioners were working from unified teams in the unified probation service. These rating scale questions were followed up with semi-structured exploratory open questions for participants to expand on their answers and offer some 'future focussed' discussion including how committed they remained to their role following structural alignment (see Appendix 1).

A total of nineteen research participants took part in the study (with initially twenty-six expressing an interest) and each focus group consisted of a mixture of practitioners from each of the four staffing groups identified above. When broken down there were: five participants from staffing group 1 (SG1), four participants from staffing group 2 (SG2), six participants from staffing group 3 (SG3), and four participants from staffing group 4 (SG4).

Participants were able to select their preferred focus group date and were only required to attend one ninety-minute focus group.

I sought volunteers by way of initial email to the Uptown PDU functional mailboxes and promoted the study during full staff meetings and by distributing a participant information sheet out to practitioners. Those participants that volunteered to take part were also asked to sign a consent form that confirmed participants understood the study and associated ethics, anonymity, data protection and dissemination as explained in the information sheet.

To have nineteen participants volunteer in total is thought to be a positively high response rate when considering that I was asking practitioners to give up ninety minutes of their busy working day especially when compared with the HMPPS 2022 'people survey' that was also live at this point, and recurrently promoted more widely, yet the completion rate for this survey was so low that the deadline had to be extended (from the original date of 21st October to the 31st October 2022) even though it only took 10-15 minutes for practitioners to complete. This perhaps prompts the need for increased practitioner-led research and a review into the way frontline feedback is gathered within the service at a central and local level.

Why this PDU?

The Uptown PDU was chosen because this study set out to be a small-scale piece of practitioner-led research with the support of the Probation Institute's Sir Graham Smith Award (https://www.probation-institute.org/sir-graham-smith-awards). I needed to ensure the best use of limited time and resources and Uptown PDU was large enough, with multiple teams and two main offices, to provide a broad mix of potential research participants. HMPPS National Research Committee approval was also gained prior to the study taking place.

Limitations

I recognise that this study has some limitations as its scope was small-scale and the data was gathered from a limited number of participants within one specific PDU. The use of focus groups as a research method allowed me to gather a large volume of rich data but I acknowledge that the findings may be limited in their generalisability.

This study focused on groups of probation practitioners (PO/PSO only) working from within one PDU. As such the research findings and conclusions may not be applicable to other geographical areas and PDUs. This study also did not capture the experiences of admin staff and or managers (i.e. SPO or higher).

A further limitation is that, as a small-scale study, there was limited scope to incorporate a range of research tools in the research design (i.e. questionnaires, follow-up interviews etc). Thus, it was considered that focus groups offered the best tool in these circumstances and enabled the collection of basic quantitative and rich qualitative data.

Support and guidance

I was fortunate enough to have mentoring support and guidance throughout this research process from the Probation Institute Academic Advisory Panel. This guidance also limited the potential for researcher bias as I was able to ensure that my study aims, questions and methodology remained objective as I sought regular oversight from these independent mentors.

Data

Rating scale results

Each focus group was recorded and transcribed using the Microsoft Teams application which allowed me to accurately revisit and thematically analyse the generated data. Each focus group contained three 'rating scale' questions that allows for the presentation of some basic descriptive statistics using the Microsoft Excel application.

The graph and table below both display this categorical data:

Average scores from total participants in each staffing group.
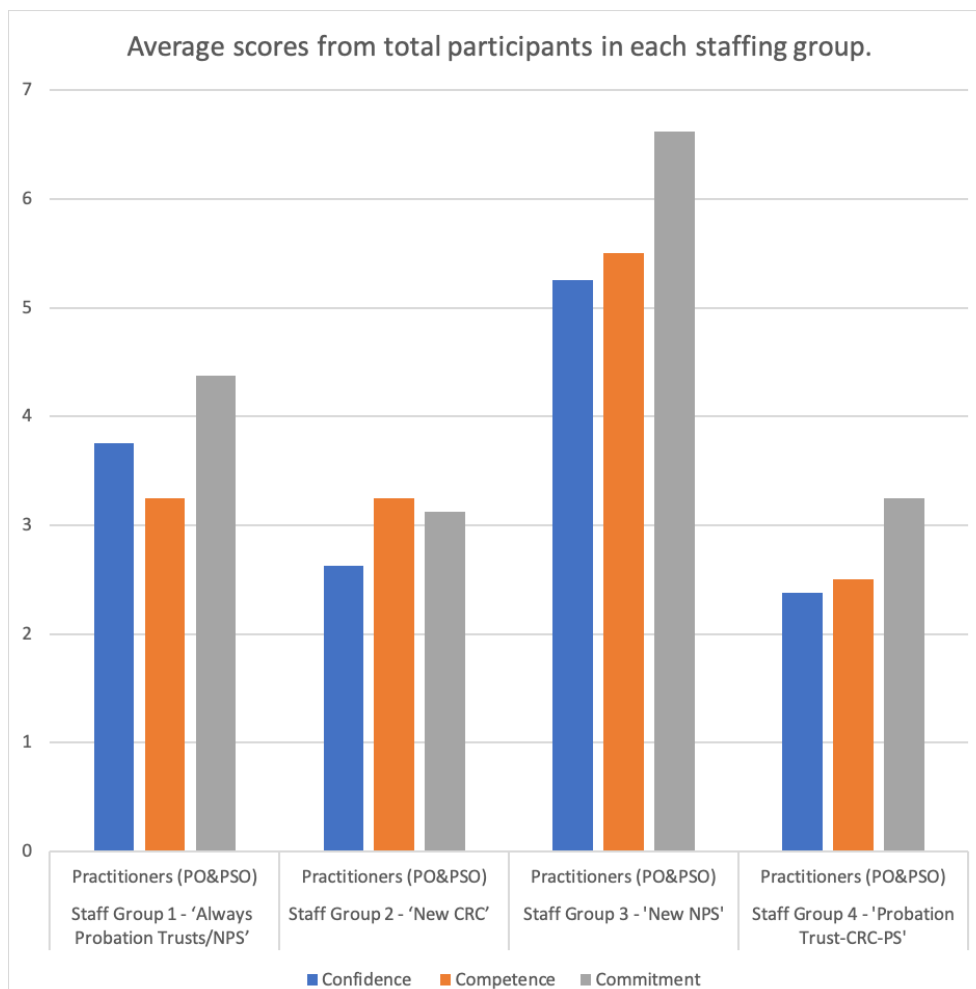
Staffing group table	Highest scoring	-		Lowest scoring
Confidence	SG3	SG1	SG2	SG4
Competence	SG3	SG1 / SG2		SG4
Commitment	SG3	SG1	SG4	SG2

Results - what practitioners said about their confidence, competence and commitment

After providing a score between 0-10 for all three of the rating scale questions, probation practitioners were then encouraged to expand on their answers and provide some qualitative feedback to substantiate their scoring.

Of course, there was a mixture of positive and negative responses and the below charts are intended to show a balanced and brief selection of responses made per staffing group regarding their feelings of confidence, competence and commitment.

The responses in the green corners of the charts below highlight the more positive responses that practitioners provided and the responses in the red corners highlight the more negative responses.

Results –
What practitioners said about their 'confidence'

Staffing Group 1
Always Probation Trusts/NPS

'Confidence remains the same as before structural alignment... same team'

'Managers good and know what they're doing'

'Less confident post structural alignment'

'Need time to get to know new processes... we moved from other departments too during structural alignment for example I moved from the courts'

'Expectation that legacy NPS know what they are doing which is not the case'

'A lot still to learn... new types of cases... I mainly held licence cases before'

Staffing Group 2
New CRC

'Not enough experienced staff to learn from'

'Have learnt a lot more since structural alignment but still not got enough time to process it all'

'Less confident now than before structural alignment'

'Not confident in the quality of my work... constant feedback on my OASys'

'Don't feel properly trained... should have been better shadowing... but no one has the time to allow us to shadow'

'Transition and structural alignment was overwhelming coming from CRC'

Staffing Group 3
New NPS

'Systems like EQUIP don't allow for increased confidence... outdated and not user friendly'

'Last minute changes via email can affect confidence'

'Previous experience not impacted on us... NPS is all we've ever known... so other than a few caseload changes structural alignment has not affected us at all'

'Workload stops me from doing the job as well as I would like to'

'Confident in processes and ability... workload and capacity affects quality'

'I feel stable... nothings new... OASys standards are the same'

'A lot of it is the same stuff as before... same as what we were doing in NPS... it's just everyday practice for us'

'Feel the same level of confidence as before structural

Staffing Group 4
Probation Trusts-CRC-PS

'Have less of a caseload now since structural alignment... but its all way more intense'

'De-skilled at CRC and now thrown back into it needing new skills and processes'

'We were shafted at CRC... no high-risk case experience before structural alignment... no proper training... the online e-learning was not good enough'

'All the high-risk processes I'm not confident with'
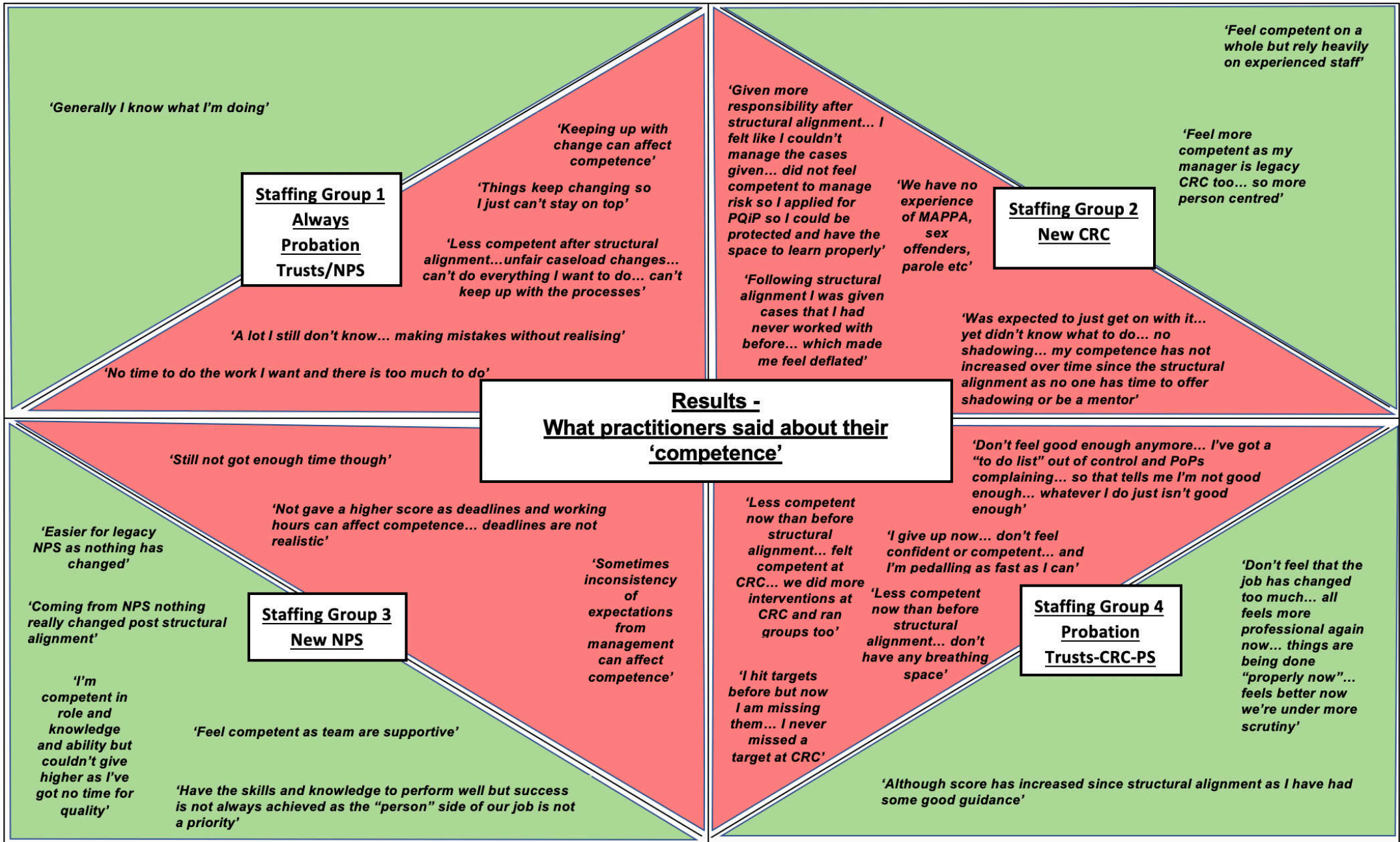
'Less confident than before structural alignment'

'Role itself has not changed... structurally it has changed... but I'm still just getting people through their order... albeit I'm not confident I'm doing a quality job... but I'm getting PoPs through their order and I'm enforcing if they are not... I'm confident in my own ability and the changes have made me robust'

Results - What practitioners said about their 'competence'

Staffing Group 1 — Always Probation Trusts/NPS

'Generally I know what I'm doing'

'Keeping up with change can affect competence'

'Things keep changing so I just can't stay on top'

'Less competent after structural alignment…unfair caseload changes… can't do everything I want to do… can't keep up with the processes'

'A lot I still don't know… making mistakes without realising'

'No time to do the work I want and there is too much to do'

Staffing Group 2 — New CRC

'Feel competent on a whole but rely heavily on experienced staff'

'Feel more competent as my manager is legacy CRC too… so more person centred'

'Given more responsibility after structural alignment… I felt like I couldn't manage the cases given… did not feel competent to manage risk so I applied for PQiP so I could be protected and have the space to learn properly'

'We have no experience of MAPPA, sex offenders, parole etc'

'Following structural alignment I was given cases that I had never worked with before… which made me feel deflated'

'Was expected to just get on with it… yet didn't know what to do… no shadowing… my competence has not increased over time since the structural alignment as no one has time to offer shadowing or be a mentor'

Staffing Group 3 — New NPS

'Still not got enough time though'

'Easier for legacy NPS as nothing has changed'

'Coming from NPS nothing really changed post structural alignment'

'I'm competent in role and knowledge and ability but couldn't give higher as I've got no time for quality'

'Not gave a higher score as deadlines and working hours can affect competence… deadlines are not realistic'

'Sometimes inconsistency of expectations from management can affect competence'

'Feel competent as team are supportive'

'Have the skills and knowledge to perform well but success is not always achieved as the "person" side of our job is not a priority'

Staffing Group 4 — Probation Trusts-CRC-PS

'Don't feel good enough anymore… I've got a "to do list" out of control and PoPs complaining… so that tells me I'm not good enough… whatever I do just isn't good enough'

'Less competent now than before structural alignment… felt competent at CRC… we did more interventions at CRC and ran groups too'

'I give up now… don't feel confident or competent… and I'm pedalling as fast as I can'

'Less competent now than before structural alignment… don't have any breathing space'

'I hit targets before but now I am missing them… I never missed a target at CRC'

'Don't feel that the job has changed too much… all feels more professional again now… things are being done "properly now"… feels better now we're under more scrutiny'

'Although score has increased since structural alignment as I have had some good guidance'

Results - What practitioners said about their 'commitment'

Staffing Group 1 - Always Probation Trusts/NPS

'Probably will still be here in 2 years but not in management... I want to work with PoPs'

'I'm committed to doing the best I can with PoPs'

'Still here... but it's a shame... been here 20 years and its gone backwards'

'I'm loyal and committed but not like I once was... I do believe in the unification though... I fought against the split before'

'Doubt I'll be here in 2 years time... no vision of becoming an SPO'

'Less committed following the structural alignment changes'

'Don't want to leave but also can't keep working like this'

Staffing Group 2 - New CRC

'I'm committed as I want to try to get onto PQiP'

'I do feel more committed as I do want to learn and increase my confidence'

'Want to get onto PQiP... only committed as I want to progress to being a PO for the learning'

'I have the same level of commitment as before structural alignment but wish I had started in NPS'

'If it wasn't for the fact I love working with PoPs I would have left ages ago'

'I do enjoy the job and might have scored more... but I just feel disheartened with the organisation at the moment'

'I keep holding out hope but its getting worse'

'Feel less committed now than before structural alignment... if this was a romantic relationship I would have left a long time ago'

Staffing Group 3 - New NPS

'I actually really like my job and I'm happy to say that'

'I'll be here a long time and I already have ideas about where I want to go'

'I absolutely love my job and like my PoPs and colleagues... I took a score off as we could be so much more efficient though... life could be easier'

'I had nightmares at the time of structural alignment but now back on fighting form and very committed again'

'If I'm feeling down I have a gentle word with myself and remind myself of how hard I have worked to get to this position'

'I'll still be here but maybe not an SPO though'

'Definitely see myself progressing to be an SPO'

Staffing Group 4 - Probation Trusts-CRC-PS

'I feel less committed following structural alignment'

'Don't know about 2 years... considering other opportunities... I feel so torn... give up the job I love or risk my health?'

'How can I be committed to a place that doesn't give a monkeys about staff... if I dropped dead... doesn't matter... they'll just reallocate my cases'

'I'm loyal to what we do and believe in the work... I'm loyal to colleagues and cases... though I have been considering my future in probation... I've got a commitment to the "actual job" and desperately trying my best'

'I'm committed to the PoPs but we're not doing any of that now... I came here to work with them'

'Still working in probation in 2 years'

Results - 'Future focused' results - 'things, people, behaviours and outcomes'

There was an evident overlap in responses when it came to the future focused discussions with practitioners regarding what 'things, people, behaviours and outcomes' would help to improve their *confidence, competence and commitment* in the new unified service.

The charts below represent a mixture of responses for each of these four 'future focused' areas made per staffing group.

Staffing group 1 responses are highlighted in the **pink** boxes below.

Staffing group 2 responses are highlighted in the **blue** boxes below.

Staffing group 3 responses are highlighted in the **yellow** boxes below.

Staffing group 4 responses are highlighted in the **grey** boxes below.

What physical/virtual 'things' practitioners said would improve their scores, thoughts and feelings?

Staffing Group 1 — Always Probation Trusts/NPS

'Time to go and understand new processes... time to get to grips and before new processes and new changes are then rolled out'

'Better incentives for PO's to volunteer as mentors... either financial or proper case reductions'

'If OASys is the "holy grail" then just make everything part of, or spring from, that one system... CRS referrals shows that it can be done... automated MAPPA screenings and AP referrals would be the dream'

'Streamlined I.T. systems... streamlined forms and referrals that all just pull through and are generated from OASys'

Staffing Group 2 — New CRC

'proper training... less e-learning'

'better training... face to face training again... not all online... face to face is more interactive'

'A better system for PSO case allocations... CRC used to allocate depending on what PSO level you were... for example if you were PP1 you did not hold DV cases... its all mixed at the moment'

Staffing Group 3 — New NPS

'Better I.T. systems... I.T. needs modernising... less duplication and pointless form filling... less time wasting'

'Systems need to populate forms automatically and link in with OASys better to pull through the information'

'We need to be more efficient in everything we do'

'OASys needs modernising and making a "live" document... and we need to utilise other ways of reviewing PoPs changes in circumstances so we can update and make changes more quickly'

'Again better I.T. would improve competence... this can then support better joint working with other in-house departments like programmes and unpaid-work... these departments could be much better at taking on cases automatically... for example structured interventions RAR referrals to programmes department... this referral should automatically spring over to them from OASys'

Staffing Group 4 — Probation Trusts-CRC-PS

'Time... its all about time... and proper training... not e-learning'

'Dedicated quiet rooms'

What practitioners said 'people' in the organisation can do to improve their scores, thoughts and feelings?

Staffing Group 1
Always
Probation
Trusts/NPS

'Reflective practice sessions with colleagues'

'Offer better incentives for PO's to become mentors'

'Recruit and retain more staff'

'PQiPs are too protected… the training is not good enough to prepare them for the reality of the job'

'Be more open and honest about the current situation and the future… and future changes'

Staffing Group 2
New CRC

'The proximity between frontline practitioners and senior management needs to reduce… so they can see what things are really like first hand'

'Increased proximity from higher up… as I don't feel valued'

'Retention of staff… especially experienced staff to learn from'

'Consistency with OASys and report feedback from management and how it's given'

'More genuine positivity from higher management… a "thank you email" is not always good enough… I feel like a mere number… its nice to be told we're good at the job and be thanked personally'

Staffing Group 3
New NPS

'People need to ask us "what is a priority for us?"… rather than just a list of prescriptive questions like that staff survey… nobody asks us things like "what do you want from your IT?"… that's how you find out what's important for staff… proper frontline feedback'

'Senior management coming to team meetings more'

'More staff retention'

'SPOs to remain supportive as they are… but consistency of expectations needs improving between SPOs'

'Management to include staff more in decision making… for example focus groups to assess frontline practitioners' initial thoughts and feelings to proposed changes'

Staffing Group 4
Probation
Trusts-CRC-PS

'SPOs to display confidence too so that this filters down'

'More management support needed'

'Huge disconnect… SLT don't come to the office… no explanation… higher managers need to sit in the office and see what we deal with'

'Consider staff learning styles better… less e-learning… more peer learning, shadowing and observation for all… not just NQO's and PQiP'

'SPOs need to be more accessible… they're always in meetings'

'Allow people to get to grips before implementing new changes… as this just adds to stress'

What practice changes/ 'behaviours', values, aims practitioners said would improve their scores, thoughts and feelings?

Staffing Group 1
Always
Probation
Trusts/NPS

'More person centred behaviour towards staff and PoPs'

'Less "perfect paperwork" approaches'

'Less process-oriented approach... less tick box'

'Stop allocating cases when already way over on workload management tool'

'Hate all this virtual contact from other agencies with PoPs... less virtual assessments and more face to face contact with PoPs when we refer'

Staffing Group 2
New CRC

'Put PoPs back at the forefront of what we do'

'Better shadowing opportunities'

'More respect for staff'

'Better exposure to more intense forums like an oral hearing... before we actually have to do it ourselves alone'

'Reduce caseloads so PoPs can be centre of practice again'

Staffing Group 3
New NPS

'How OASys feedback is given needs to be more motivating to improve confidence'

'More localised decision making where possible'

'Other departments could be better at automatically taking on cases to deliver interventions... rather than the onus being on the OM to refer... system could just alert programmes that they are suitable... relives pressure on OM... improves efficiency... and makes our job easier'

'Better internal case reallocation process as the next OM is constantly picking up slack'

'Staff can see that things are "done to" SPOs as well so this affects confidence'

Staffing Group 4
Probation
Trusts-CRC-PS

'Wellbeing stuff on MS Teams just feels like nonsense... no time to attend things like stress management as I've got far too much to do'

'More consideration for PoPs diversity needs... phone calls from CRS providers is not suitable for all... just shows SEEDS is not happening in reality'

'Wellbeing stuff is all lip service... pretend they are "looking after staff"... wellbeing stuff needs more value in itself... people need to be able to access it'

'Clarity on what the aims and values actually are... its isolating when you don't know these'

'Become less detached'

What visions for the future/ 'outcomes' practitioners said would improve their scores, thoughts and feelings?

Staffing Group 1 — Always Probation Trusts/NPS

'Less forms and paperwork... more of this would lower confidence'

'More staff'

'No more changes'

'Better recruitment campaigns... they're currently mis-selling the job... so people leave when they realise what the job is in reality'

'less duplication and repetition of systems information'

Staffing Group 2 — New CRC

'Better proximity from management so we have more faith in them'

'Less false promises'

'More staffing... or better communication with staff for why they can't recruit'

'Better staff retention... explore why staff leave... NQO's are already leaving... why?'

'More face to face contact with PoPs... that's the part people enjoy'

Staffing Group 3 — New NPS

'More staff and better retention of experienced staff'

'More face to face contact with PoPs as this is the part of the job people enjoy'

'Management taking action on the things that are raised... by not doing so would lower confidence'

'I would like to see a commitment to efficiency and how we can work better'

'The OPD form now being embedded in OASys is a good start... and CRS tool pulls through information from OASys... this efficiency needs to continue in other areas'

Staffing Group 4 — Probation Trusts-CRC-PS

'Less blame on frontline staff'

'Stability... I want to feel settled'

'More presence in the office from other agencies... reduces the amount of time we have to chase for feedback'

'I would like to see a commitment to time... and allowing us time to get to grips with new changes'

'More general respect for staff... stop allocating cases when you're on annual leave'

Analysis

The next section of this report will explore and analyse some of the themes that are present within the data and tie the discussion in with some existing academic literature in the fields of 'self-efficacy' (Bandura, 1995), 'professional identity' and probation 'culture' (Burke et al, 2017) including concepts of how people react to times of change and upheaval in the workplace (Worrall and Mawby, 2013).

The reader should note that this study generated a rich amount of qualitative data and of course not all elements of this data and existing theory can be analysed and discussed within the limited scope of this report.

The following discussion sections are separated into staffing group headings for ease of reading, but the academic theory and concepts discussed within each should not be viewed as wholly and exclusively applicable to that section.

Themes and discussion SG1 (Always Probation Trusts/NPS)

When examining the quantitative results for SG1, they reported the second highest average confidence and commitment scores and the joint-second highest competence score (joint with SG2).

Albeit it could be argued that the scores in all the staffing groups are not that high overall and the numbers in the data graph are not assigned to any particular value to offer any particular meaning. However, the quantitative data is used here to loosely support the theoretical models and concepts discussed.

Albert Bandura explained self-efficacy in terms of 'whether people think productively, pessimistically, or optimistically and in self-enacting or self-debilitating ways; how well they motivate themselves and persevere in the face of difficulties; the quality of their emotional well-being and their vulnerability to stress and depression' (Bandura, 2009).

This definition has implications for probation practitioners because a confident, capable, and optimistic practitioner is more effective than one who is pessimistic and acts in self-debilitating ways (De Boer et al, 2016). Thus, self-efficacy can be defined as a person's confidence in their ability to discharge their role and the higher their feeling of self-efficacy the more competent they prove to be (Versland and Ericson, 2017).

This theory generally suggests then that confidence in ability positively impacts on actual ability (i.e. competence) (Bandura, 1995). Thus, it could be argued that the higher an individual's self-confidence, then their belief in ability and capability to perform competently should be greater still.

However, this premise does not seem to fit flawlessly when analysing the quantitative data collated from SG1 as this group provided a higher average score of confidence than competence. Whereas the other three staffing groups provided higher average scores of

competence even though their confidence was lower (within their respective data sets), which would perhaps be more in tune with the basic idea of self-efficacy theory.

This is then an interesting result within the quantitative results of this study because average competence scores in the other three staffing groups exceeded their average score of confidence (despite SG2 and SG4 reporting lower confidence than SG1), whereas the average competence score of SG1 was less than their confidence score. However, it was not the aim of this study to examine correlations pertaining to quantitative data sets but may perhaps be an interesting area of further research.

Although, when examining these scores alongside the qualitative responses provided by SG1 practitioners then what the discussion leads to is that: SG1 feel more internally self-assured in their abilities than SG2 and SG4, due to their previous experience of working in the NPS, but the structural alignment has affected their impressions of actual capability. The structural alignment changes brought with it new professional changes that even SG1 practitioners were not previously used to.

This is interesting as the previous research in this area has tended to centre around the emigration of practitioners from the probation trusts to the CRC and how this 'diaspora' (that being the movement of people from their original homeland) (Burke et al, 2017) had affected professional identities and culture within CRC and the private sector ideology that was present within this organisation.

Yet the results of this study evidence that the effects of practitioner immigration (brought about by structural alignment) and movement of practitioners internally within the new unified public sector service in Uptown, has also affected practitioners with a legacy NPS background; thus a 'fractured professional identity' is prevalent within the PDU (Burke et al, 2017). For SG1 practitioners, they too are experiencing a new 'hybrid culture' (Waring, 2015) which has impacted upon their confidence, competence and commitment more so than before.

Despite SG1 practitioners' competence no longer exceeding their confidence, they still provided the second highest score of commitment. Although the themes of 'exit' and 'organisational cynicism' did come through in discussions with these practitioners when applying the adapted 'exit, voice, loyalty' model to the data which is a model used to analyse and compare employees' responses to adverse workplace conditions (Worrall and Mawby, 2013).

However, the qualitative data shows that this sense of loyalty for SG1 practitioners is complicated, similarly to SG4, and resonates to an extent with previous research and academic literature in this area relating to probation ethos and values and some sense of 'guardian' when considering the typologies of professional identity narratives (Robinson et al, 2015).

It is also noteworthy that despite SG1 practitioners being 'lifers' (practitioners that have worked in the service for many years) (Mawby and Worrall, 2013) they spoke about needing

more 'time' to learn and get to grips with the structural alignment changes and there was less desire within this group to move into management positions in the new unified service (compared to say SG3). Despite SG1 no doubt having a lot more experience to offer and impress upon other practitioner groups who have no previous experience of a unified probation service (i.e. SG2 and SG3).

Themes and discussion SG2 (New CRC)

This brings discussion onto one of the main themes that came through in the data with SG2 practitioners. This group reported amongst the most highly that they were 'overwhelmed' and needed far more 'proper training' (i.e. not online e-learning) and critically more 'shadowing' opportunities through practitioners with previous experience of managing certain PoP groups with typically higher risk profiles.

Whilst structural alignment changes for SG2 brought about a slightly lower caseload than before, their 'type' and 'intensity' of caseload changed. SG2 practitioners for example had never managed MAPPA, sex offenders or high-risk cases before. It is evident within the data that the lack of shadowing opportunities, with other more experienced practitioners to learn from within Uptown PDU to manage these new cases, has had an impact on their scores and feelings of confidence and competence.

Referring to self-efficacy theory supports this assertion, as 'vicarious experiences' provided by models like oneself has been proven to raise the observer's belief that they too can succeed and that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities. Likewise observing others fail despite high effort has been proven to lower an observer's judgment of their own efficacy and undermines their level of motivation (Bandura, 1995).

When considering professional identity narratives that came through in SG2 data, despite practitioners fitting into the 'offender manager' type of probation worker (Mawby and Worrall, 2013) with shorter probation work experience (and no unified probation experience at all similar to SG3), there remained a sense of 'guardian' (Burke et al, 2017).

This sense of guardian seemed to centre around wanting to deliver 'quality' probation work which they associated to a 'person-centred' practice culture (Raynor, 2019) as opposed to 'process-oriented' practice culture. There was a strong sense that following structural alignment they were now having to adapt to an even more process-oriented culture than before when at the CRC, which they found difficult to comprehend and again affected their confidence, competence and commitment. This is a thought-provoking result as it clearly evidences that to some extent SG2's previous experience of the CRC, despite CRC being led by private sector ideology, allowed for certain personal values such as 'innovation' to thrive.

Another interesting result of the study is that SG2 provided the lowest average score of commitment and generally they stated that following the structural alignment changes they felt less committed than before. Again they related this to the feeling that for them structural alignment brought about even more process-oriented work (although this feeling was also present within other groups such as SG4) which for these practitioners meant that they were

more willing to report actual or perceived 'exit' strategies to cope with the structural alignment changes (Worrall and Mawby, 2013).

Given the current staffing, recruitment and retention crisis within the probation service, it would be a further interesting area of study to examine whether the lower scoring staffing groups identified within this study (i.e. SG2 and SG4) are currently amongst the highest groups of practitioners now exiting Uptown's structurally aligned PDUs (whether by actual exit or sick leave); if so the results of this study may offer some indication for the reasons why.

Themes and discussion SG3 (New NPS)

Both the quantitative and qualitative results show that SG3 reported consistently more positive scores, thoughts and feelings of confidence, competence and commitment when compared with the other three groups of legacy practitioners.

This notion that higher feelings of self-efficacy equate to higher internal impressions of competence is then most evident within the data provided by SG3 with many practitioners in this group speaking overall a lot more positively that following the structural alignment changes these feelings were not significantly affected for them.

This result is interesting when compared to responses from SG1 (who are also legacy NPS) but reported lower scores in all three areas and reported higher levels of dissatisfaction with the new unified service in Uptown.

Previous research into self-efficacy theory when applied to newly qualified teachers supports discussion here. Newly qualified teachers were found to have higher levels of occupational self-efficacy, did not tend to experience high levels of work-related stress, and held higher belief in their ability and capability to cope with challenging work-related tasks (Cooper, 2021). Interestingly, within the data of this study there is evidence of higher levels of reported 'burnout' (Phillips et al, 2020) within SG1 and SG4; the longer serving staffing groups.

This supports the assertion then that fostering and maintaining high self-efficacy within probation practitioners (whether that be through: face-to-face training, peer-learning and shadowing, strong authentic leadership examples, reflective practice skills sessions etc) is essential for increasing performance and decreasing levels of stress (Bandura, 1995), which in turn combats the feeling of needing to exit whether by leaving the service or taking extensive periods of sick leave (Worrall and Mawby, 2013).

The results of this study evidence that SG3's previous probation work experience (i.e. post-TR legacy NPS background) has allowed them to adapt more easily to the structural alignment changes as 'NPS is all they've ever known' and for this group of practitioners in Uptown PDU there has not been as much perceived change in everyday practice and service delivery, reporting a lesser amount of 'role conflict' (Worrall and Mawby, 2013).

SG3 data evidences that they held a higher level of resilience to the structural alignment changes and interestingly these changes had not impacted on their thoughts and feelings of commitment, whilst there is evidence that SG3 remain 'loyal to the PoPs' in line with probation's social work ethos and values (Robinson et al, 2015). It can be argued that SG3 evidenced higher levels of commitment to the organisation itself. As the data suggests that they were a lot more optimistic about career progression within the new unified service in Uptown and already envisioned themselves in SPO and higher management positions.

Elements of the data provided by SG3 resonates then with the 'pioneer' typology of professional identity narratives (Burke et al, 2017), as higher levels of pragmatism were reported and desires to improve 'efficiency' of service went hand in hand with 'quality' of service (namely in regard to poor I.T. systems that need drastic improvement to remove repetitive form-filling processes).

The data also suggests that SG3 held a clearer sense of their current professional identity both in terms of an emotive internalised concept of self and regarding their required action within their job role currently (Cooper, 2021), as evidenced by SG3 practitioners reporting to feeling a lot more stable than the other three groups as they were more accustomed to the 'processes' and more comfortable with the expectations of the new unified service and PDU standards.

SG3 spoke a lot more optimistically, compared to the other three, about feeling confident and competent with the processes relating to their current role and their ability to master these more tactfully. They did not indicate too greatly that they felt under-educated or under-trained and seemed to best understand the current ideology of the unified service and PDU agendas. This therefore supports wider academic discussion of the need to invest in probation practitioners' knowledge and expertise in order to aid the development of a unified professional identity which in turn will support the development of collective relational culture (Tidmarsh, 2022).

Whilst it may be tempting for the reader to believe that SG3 are then more 'process-oriented' practitioners regarding the engagement and supervision of PoPs (Raynor, 2019), this is not what is being discussed here, neither is the quality of case management practices between these different staffing groups, as this would require separate study and evaluation. The data within this study simply evidences that SG3 feel more confident and competent with the current practice processes required to carry out their roles effectively, following the structural alignment changes, and are the most committed to their role and service expectations out of the four staffing groups.

Themes and discussion SG4 (Probation Trusts-CRC-PS)

In comparison, SG4 gave the lowest average score of confidence and competence and their commitment score was second lowest too (by a fraction), with many reporting that they would have scored higher prior to structural alignment.

It can be said that SG4 is the most complex practitioner group as their previous probation work experience involves the highest rate of continuous structural and cultural change and changes to expectations of individual practice (from probation trusts to CRC and then back to a unified service again).

This practitioner groups' previous probation work experience is then quite unique, which some have even described as detrimental (Cooper, 2017), in the way that their previous experience has impacted on their thoughts and feelings following structural alignment.

A key theme of SG4 was that of feeling 'de-skilled' as opposed to SG2 who spoke more consistently about needing further 'up-skilling' following the structural alignment, despite both groups being legacy CRC. This further evidences that SG4's professional identity remains 'fractured' in some way and the structural alignment further impacted upon this feeling (Burke et al, 2017). This was coupled with a sensitivity amongst SG4 practitioners that after structural alignment they were not 'good enough anymore'.

Whilst initial reunification was significant, structural alignment in Uptown was the true 'generative moment' (Campeau, 2015) of profound frontline reality change and practice instability, which brought back into sharp focus previous bleak dispositions of CRC being viewed as 'second class probation' (Burke et al, 2017).

The concept of 'emergent identities' and the 'pioneers, guardians and marooned' typology (Waring and Bishop, 2011) is also relevant to discussion here and is a useful model that can help to understand the emergent probation culture within the PDU.

As indicated within the data there was evidence of the 'marooned' professional identity within SG4 as they reported the most well-defined feelings of abandonment by the CRC (and probation trusts prior) and were struggling to adapt to the changes within their work brought about by structural alignment. They had the sense that the CRC 'threw' them back into the unified service with no 'proper' training for managing high risk cases supports this assertion, and the evidence within the data suggests that has led some SG4 practitioners to have less capacity to reconstruct their professional identities.

Although an interesting result was that those who provided more positive scores and responses within SG4 data related this back to a feeling that the structural alignment changes in Uptown was a way for them to reconfigure their 'professional legitimacy' (Deering and Feilzer, 2017) and some SG4 practitioners reported that they were a 'professional again now'.

This supports theory around 'internal legitimacy' and 'self-legitimacy' (Deering and Feilzer, 2017) and ties in with elements of the guardian and marooned sub-group 'defender of the probation ethos', all concepts which were deemed to be tainted and lost by many CRC practitioners following TR. The data within this study also supports the theory that 'marooned' and 'guardian' identity narratives are usually most prevalent amongst longer serving staff (Burke et al, 2017).

'Social persuasion' (Bandura, 1995) through direct engagement and collaboration with highly efficacious authentic senior-leaders would be a way of boosting confidence and competence with SG4 practitioners alongside devising ways to improve their feelings of internal and self-legitimacy. This is supported by the data within this study and previous research that has proven one way to increase self-efficacy, where confidence and competence has been diminished, is by having strong authentic leadership that encourages collaboration which in turn improves self-efficacy and collective efficacy within the organisation (Cooper, 2021).

This discussion of strong authentic leadership also includes the need for 'consistency' of expectations of practice within the PDU, as SG4 (together with SG2) spoke notably about the need for less 'inconsistency' amongst SPO's and senior leaders' new expectations of frontline practice following structural alignment. Together with some staffing groups needing more clarity on what the 'aims and values' of the new unified service actually are, this unknown and potential conflict of practitioner and organisational values has led to some feeling more distant and isolated from the new unified service.

This need for reduced 'proximity' between senior-leaders and frontline practitioners and this sense of distance from decision-makers and decision-making processes has been noted in previous literature (Burke et al, 2017). The data in this study further suggests that this sense of being disempowered and 'huge disconnect' has led to some practitioners not feeling equally 'valued' by seniors after structural alignment which in turn has impacted on their commitment to the new unified organisation in Uptown.

Therefore, more senior-leader presence and engagement with frontline practitioners (especially SG4 practitioners) would seemingly strengthen beliefs amongst practitioners that they have what it takes to succeed and can be a way to realign these values.

This discussion also invokes the concept of loss and separation (Robinson et al, 2015), albeit regarding a feeling of loss relating to previous skills, knowledge and expertise that SG4 practitioners felt they had before at either probation trusts and/or CRC. Previous research indicated a sense of loss was felt within the CRC generally following TR (Robinson et al, 2015) and so it might have been assumed that this sense of loss and nostalgia would have been lessened following unification and structural alignment. But the data within this report evidences that these narratives remain prevalent within the PDU, even after structural alignment, and is most evident within SG4 practitioners whose experience of organisational loss is *multi-layered.*

Conclusion

To conclude, an overall intention of this study was to explore if, and to what extent, probation practitioners' previous experience (either legacy NPS or CRC) impacts on their thoughts, feelings and mindset about their role (and ultimately their performance).

This was done by examining how confident, competent and committed practitioners now feel with a specific emphasis on four different staffing groups of legacy practitioners working within Uptown PDU, to capture how practitioners from these legacy organisations were feeling now they were working together from unified teams following structural alignment. This report highlights that a probation practitioners' previous work experience has had an impact on their thoughts, feelings and transition to the new unified service and the extent of this impact is dependent upon their previous probation work experience.

Interestingly, these thoughts and feelings and their levels of confidence, competence and commitment *vary* between different groups of legacy practitioners depending on whether they have experience of probation after or before TR and depending on which legacy organisation they initially joined.

This report shows that there is a mixture of professional identities within Uptown PDU and a variety of strategies that practitioners are using to come to terms with these changes. It would be interesting to replicate this study in other PDUs for further comparisons.

This study suggests that the structural alignment changes have had an impact on professional identity and culture within the Uptown PDU. But it is recognised that some of these thoughts and feelings may have pre-dated structural alignment, and the concepts and models used in the analysis to explore the themes within the data, may not completely capture the nuances and complexities of human behaviour as human behaviour is not static or tied to a fixed identity. The theory and discussion in this report simply offers some useful lenses that can be adopted to explore how practitioners adapt to times of organisational change and what coping strategies they may employ (Burke et al, 2017).

An interesting piece of future local research may be to also include a fifth group of practitioners: 'those that joined Uptown PDU after the 2022 structural alignment and so whose only experience has been gained within a fully unified service with no organisational disruption'. The results from this future group may again offer an interesting comparison to assess whether any new emergent professional identities have formed or if there have been any further cultural shifts.

Additionally, an interesting area of future research would be to conduct the same or similar study with SPO grades for which the results of this study would then offer an interesting comparison between practitioner grade and offer further insight and advancement to the academic study of probation professional identities and culture.

It is hoped that the key themes, results and discussions within this report are considered useful by Uptown PDU SPOs, middle managers and senior leaders. The 'future focussed' results may assist with future planning of key operational changes and this data offers use for increasing (and maintaining) feelings of confidence, competence and commitment amongst frontline practitioners. Although it is recognised that some of the results may not be within the immediate power of the PDU itself and may require additional resources that are outside of PDU and regional control.

Nonetheless, this report offers a ground floor practitioner-led insight into how structural change has affected different staffing groups within a newly unified PDU and wider probation service.

Recommendations

The following eight recommendations are again separated into staffing group headings for ease of reading. This separation follows the structure of the aims, data and analysis sections of this report.

However these again should not be viewed as wholly and exclusively applicable to that particular staffing group, as it is recognised that any recommendation would likely have a benefit for all staffing groups.

Of course, more recommendations can be drawn from this report, but I have attempted to summarise with a noteworthy eight.

SG1 (Always Probation Trusts/NPS)

Confidence and competence:

1) The unified service and Uptown PDU specifically should grant practitioners far more time between the implementation of further changes to both organisational structure and practice expectations, so that practitioners can get to grips with the current demands and challenges of their work. This will increase confidence and competence as practitioners will have more time to master any new processes and workload tasks that they were not previously used to.

Commitment:

2) Create better *career growth opportunities* and more *lucrative career progression prospects* to ensure that practitioner commitment and loyalty to their role and organisation increases. This will also allow experienced staff to then impress their knowledge and expertise upon less experienced staff within the new unified service and PDU specifically. This approach should be developed alongside a recognition that this sense of loyalty is complicated, as the probation ethos and values that were once integral to person-centred probation work have indeed changed in line with bureaucratic tenets.

However by developing *career plans* which allows practitioners to adapt and improve their position within the organisation, and increased evidence that the new unified service genuinely wants to see individuals succeed beyond the specifications of their initial job role, will lead to an increased sense of connection and in turn commitment will increase.

Career plans that set out clear goals and objectives that both the organisation and practitioners want to achieve (through regular performance reviews and appraisals with an increased emphasis on where practitioners are performing well) will ensure that practitioners'

ambitions coincide with their future career prospects. This will ensure commitment and loyalty to the organisation. If practitioners establish that their commitment would be increased elsewhere within the new unified service, then efforts should be made to ensure they are able to thrive in a position that best suits their current motivations and ambitions.

SG2 (New CRC)

Confidence and competence:

3) Coordinate the availability and accessibility of *peer*-led *learning and shadowing opportunities* with experienced staff. This should be considered alongside an improved continuous *face to face training* package. These methods of learning would support practitioners in feeling more confident and competent as this allows for an increase in vicarious learning experiences and reflective skills practice opportunities.

Commitment:

4) Establish practical and feasible ways that the *proximity* between decision-makers and frontline staff can be reduced and encourage meaningful *collaboration* with practitioners in decision-making processes. This will improve self-efficacy and collective efficacy within the organisation and PDU specifically. Increasing the practitioners' voice within these decision-making processes will in-turn increase commitment as practitioners will feel they are *part of* decision-making processes rather than *done to.*

Authentic leadership is also important and is an approach that can promote a rich and *consistent* set of values and practice expectations through clear actions and communication styles. It is of upmost benefit to adopt in times of change and challenge when trust, collaboration and engagement are acutely important (e.g. following structural alignment).

This approach is important because it promotes stronger collaboration and more effective communication that contributes to positive working environments where staff can be open and honest which cultivates *innovation*, creativity, learning and boosts success. This openness can then encourage people to think differently about problems, find better solutions and reduces levels of stress and anxiety.

Another important benefit of authentic leadership is that it promotes trust which is paramount when leading individuals, teams and organisations through change and challenges such as staff shortages, new initiatives and drives for efficiency. These are all factors that contribute to a constantly shifting professional culture and identity where resilience and trust are essential backbones for individual practitioners and teams that need to remain encouraged to perform at their best despite challenging circumstances.

SG3 (New NPS)

Confidence and competence:

5) I.T. systems need to be improved so that duplication and valuable work time is not wasted on repetitive form-filling processes. The organisation should continue to develop streamlined ways in which forms and referrals are automatically populated by pulling through key information from one recording system. This would improve efficiency and support practitioners' feelings of confidence and competence.

Commitment:

6) Again, develop pragmatic ways in which service *efficiency* and practice processes can be streamlined, as this will maintain and increase commitment. The burden of staffing shortages across the service and high workload demands will have less of an impact on existing staff if efficiency is significantly increased.

Otherwise, existing practitioners will start to feel more job dissatisfaction as they become overworked. This will give rise to burnout, anxiety and stress and practitioners will seek ways to exit the service or adopt unhealthy coping strategies.

Organisational expedience will grow, resilience will waver and practitioners' ability to effectively perform work-related tasks will decline as they will cut corners to manage the sheer volume of work they are expected to do. As this rule bending increases then public protection and effective risk management will decrease which in turn will become a contributing factor to staff stress and anxiety and a vicious cycle will continue. Improving service efficiency and developing ways that practitioners can work better can combat this.

SG4 (Probation Trusts-CRC-PS)

Confidence and competence:

7) The new unified service should facilitate a growth in feelings of professional self and internal *legitimacy* as this will help to increase feelings of confidence, competence and commitment. By increasing practitioners' feelings of rightfulness and validity for the position they hold will allow practitioners to feel that they are doing a good job and are indeed good enough.

Incentivised schemes for practitioners and PoPs to make reward and recognition nominations for their good practice, and work done with PoPs, is one way of promoting legitimacy at a local PDU level. But efforts to increase the new unified service's external legitimacy as a whole, especially in the eyes of the public through positive success stories and better public relations, will likely have a far more constructive impact on self and internal legitimacy.

Commitment:

8) SPOs, middle managers and senior leaders should reaffirm what the core *values* of the new unified service actually are. This would allow practitioners to assess whether their own

personal values remain aligned to the current set of organisational values and local PDU agendas. If practitioners determine that values are aligned, then practitioners' commitment to their role will increase.

The Uptown PDU's foundational practice principles are not a set of values. Instead, they are ethical propositions related to action and practical application. The PDU foundational practice principles focus solely on how probation work should be practiced, organised, managed and planned. They offer limited insight into the abstract ideas or ideal notions that are also necessary for informing the way in which practitioners should act. These ideas and notions are also important when considering professional identity, culture and the relationships practitioners form between themselves, and of course with PoPs.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 (focus group design plan - semi-structured prompts/questions)

- **Initial introductions;**
  - Ask for practitioners' current role (PO or PSO)
  - Ask for brief summary of previous probation service experience (one of the 4 staffing groups)

1. 'Always Probation Trusts/NPS' – those who worked for probation trusts before the TR split and remained in the NPS after.
2. 'New CRC' – practitioners that joined CRC after TR and whose only experience has been gained within CRC.
3. 'New NPS' - practitioners that joined after TR and whose only experience has been gained within the NPS.
4. 'Probation Trust-CRC-PS' – practitioners who worked for Probation Trusts prior to TR, then moved to CRC, and are now experiencing the reunification.

- **Explain the research project and research aims;**
  - To explore to what extent, probation practitioners' previous work experience and organisational background (i.e. NPS or CRC) has impacted on their thoughts, feelings and transition to the new unified probation service in the Uptown PDU.
  - To explore the impact of the recent structural alignment changes on practitioners' views of their own performance in the new unified Uptown PDU workforce and the impact of these changes on practitioners' professional identity.
  - To explore the staff culture within Uptown PDU's new unified workforce and assess if staff from both 'legacy' organisations now feel equally valued.
  - To identify key themes, findings and recommendations that can be fed back to management and senior leaders for them to consider as the structural alignment changes continue to embed.

- **Recognise the sensitivity of the research project;**
  - The research does not aim to seek out specifically sensitive or upsetting information from participants, but it is acknowledged that discussing experiences, thoughts, feelings and issues pertaining to professional identity and staff culture may invoke an emotional response/distress.
  - All participants will be advised clearly of the subject matter and voluntary nature of the research
  - All participants will be provided with information of emotional support available for staff and advised to consult their line-manager if they need to.
  - If a participant becomes distressed during interview, then they will be advised to have a break or conclude the interview.

Questions:

Confidence (Organisational Structure/Context)

1) Following the structural alignment changes within Uptown PDU that now means practitioners are working from unified teams in the unified probation service. On a scale of 0 – 10 how *confident* in general do you feel in being able to fulfil your role now that these changes have been implemented? (0 being not at all confident and 10 being very confident)

- Confidence meaning: the quality of being certain of your abilities or of having trust in people, plans, or the future.

2) What made you give that score?

- Do you feel more or less confident post-structural alignment?
- To what extent do you feel that your previous probation experience has affected your score?

3) What physical/virtual *things* would improve this score and why? (e.g. things within the office space, equipment, tools, resources etc)

4) How can *people* within the organisation help to improve that score? (e.g. colleagues, managers, senior leaders)

5) What practice changes/*behaviours*, values and aims would you like the new unified service to work towards that would help to improve that score?

- How valued do you feel as a legacy CRC or NPS practitioner?

6) How confident are you in the unified service's vision for the future? What do you make of where the unified service is going? what *outcomes* would increase your confidence?

7) Finally what would lower your confidence and why?

Competence (Practice focus)

1) Following the structural alignment changes within Uptown PDU that now means practitioners are working from unified teams in the unified probation service. On a scale of 0 – 10 how *competent* do you feel in being able to fulfil your role now that these changes have been implemented? (0 being not at all competent and 10 being very competent)

- Competence meaning: having the necessary ability, knowledge, or skill to do something successfully.

2) What made you give that score?

- Do you feel more or less competent post-structural alignment?
- To what extent do you feel that your previous probation experience has affected your score?

3) What physical/virtual *things* would help to improve that score and why? (e.g. things within the office space, equipment, tools, resources etc)

4) How can *people* within the organisation help to improve that score? (e.g. colleagues, managers, senior leaders)

5) What practice changes/*behaviours*, values and organisational aims would make you feel more competent?

- As legacy CRC or NPS do you feel more or less competent than your counterpart?

6) What *outcomes* would you like to see before you could improve your score? What skills and abilities would be needed for you to improve that score?

7) Finally is there anything that would lower your feeling of competence score and why?

Commitment

Finally, in this section I am going to move the discussion on to "commitment".

- Committed meaning: loyal and willing to give your time and energy to something that you believe in.

1) So, following the structural alignment changes within Uptown PDU. On a scale of 0 – 10 how *committed* do you remain to your role now that these changes have been implemented? (0 being not at all committed and 10 being very committed).

2) Do you feel more, or less, committed to probation following the structural realignment changes? – yes/no - why?

3) Where would like to be in two year's time from now?